

## ISABELLA RÍOS'S AMBIVALENT CHICANA FEMINISM IN *VICTUUM*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In what was probably the first published essay about Chicana novelists, Francisco A. Lomelí commented on the little critical attention Chicana novelists had received until 1985. This critic ascribes this lack of interest in Chicana literature to the insignificant role played by artistic productions by women in the cultural domain. In order to frame his discussion within the feminist project of recovery and discussion of literature by women, Lomelí draws on two groundbreaking studies in the field of feminist literary criticism: Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination* (1976). Both of these works meant a significant step towards a critique of patriarchal structures and representations of women in literature by men (Millet) and towards analyses of the particularity of women's experiences in literature (Spacks). However, Lomelí detaches himself from these critics' main objective—to differentiate between male and female literature—and instead problematizes Spacks' assumption that in spite of the variety of social and cultural conditions under which women live, there are more similarities than differences between them ("Chicana Novelists" 33). As he sees it, the fact that such a problematic category like "women's literature" may have come to exist, verifies the normative character of male values. Since men assume the universality of their values, they would never consciously write about what it means to be a human male, nor analyse literature emphasizing the particularity of the writer's sex (33). Lomelí sees the difficulty of defining what Chicana literature as a result of its simultaneous inclusion within the bodies of "women's" and "Chicano" literature.

Since the mid 1970's and over the 1980's we have observed the progressive development of what is now known as Chicana literature and Chicana criticism. Critics like

Sonia Saldívar-Hull and Norma Alarcón have argued that when speaking about these women's literature, it is not enough to speak about their experience "as women"; nor does it suffice to speak about the subject no matter how multiple voiced it is. Saldívar-Hull's concept of "border-feminism" involves looking at the "material geopolitical issues that redirect feminist discourse" (208). As Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano has said in relation to Chicana criticism, Chicana critics are very aware of the relationship between their criticism and the political situation of Chicanas and of other working-class women of color ("Chicana Literature" 140). Chicana, Latina and women of color criticism and literature, theory and practice, are inevitably bound in the task of opening up new spaces for new voices, and of helping us hear significant silences by establishing correlations between history, national identity, and gender representation.

It should be emphasized that the confusion that arises when trying to define the body of Chicana literature is due in part to the recent history of the term "Chicana." Like the associated masculine term, "Chicano" has clear political, liberationist connotations and has its origins in the late 1960s, when an emerging working-class Mexican-American student movement of political and cultural affirmation chose to call itself *Chicano Movement*. As Lomelí has pointed out, various shifts in identity have taken place amongst those who are generically known as Chicanos or Mexican-Americans, and one needs to acknowledge that many of the works Chicanos are claiming for themselves might be "common to two national and/or ethnic literary histories" ("Po(l)etics" 230). He acknowledges the need to see the connections of contemporary works to their literary past, but he also deems it necessary to consider that the formal identification of those works has not always been under the rubric of "Chicano".<sup>1</sup>

In 1977 Marcela Trujillo stated that the attempts at unification by the *Chicano movement* made it necessary to borrow and invent symbols to create a sense of commonality and mutual identification for "not all Chicanos were brown; not all were Catholic; not all were Spanish surnamed; and not all were Spanish speaking" (40). These symbols were mainly the concept of a Chicano occupied territory named Aztlán, the Indian mother, a repudiation of the Spanish father as the colonizer.<sup>2</sup> Ten years after the constitution of the movement and in the face of its decreasing militancy, Trujillo wondered whether that was not a sign that "Mexican identification has not been sufficient" to fight against the oppression of Mexican-Americans in the U.S. A proof that the Chicano movement had failed in representing the interests of all people of Mexican origin, was that, under the influence of the feminist movement, Chicanas were appropriating the symbols of *Chicanismo* and revising them according to their particular needs and their feminist position. Trujillo's is one of the first introductory essays to the themes and motifs underlying the quest for identity in Chicana literature: the affirmation of the indigenous mother, her association with the earth and with the virgin of Guadalupe as well as with the earth goddess Tonantzin, and most importantly, the sympathetic portrayal and revision of the myth of Malinche.<sup>3</sup>

Although these motifs will be present in the contemporary poetry of Carmen Tafolla, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Sylvia Gonzáles and Pat Mora, and in the fiction of Sandra Cisneros, Helena Viramontes and Denise Chávez, the indigenous identification does not make itself felt in the work that engages this discussion. *Victuum* (1976), considered by Lomelí as the first Chicana novel if we take into account that it was copyrighted in 1974 ("Chicana novelists" 34), is now part of a quite consolidated Chicano/a literary canon and Ríos herself has stated that she would like to see it classified as a "Chicano" novel

(Lomelí, "Isabella" 60). However, the author has also said that she writes about "womanhood, being a woman, because I am a woman" (58). The novel has been analysed in relation to the psychic development of the main character within a mother-daughter bond,<sup>4</sup> as well as to the construction of female subjectivity around the figure of the mother and the repression of the political structures leading to the social identification with her.<sup>5</sup> This chapter intends to complement previous analysis of the novel by considering the particular politics of the writer as expressed through the relationship between the public and the private at the representational, rhetorical and generic levels. Given the prefatory character of the novel, it is especially interesting to consider the particular views it transmits with regards to both the feminist and the Chicano movements that were thriving at the time of its publication, as well as to look at how it anticipates what is known today as *Chicana* feminism.

The reading of *Victuum* provided in this discussion has been influenced by the impact of cultural studies and women of color feminism, both of which have stressed the interdependence of categories in the analysis of cultural texts. Hence my interest in how conceptions and representations of race, class and gender might affect each other in this work. This concern with the politics of representation combines with a concern with the politics of genre, that is, the relationship between literary genre and feminist practice. When Lomelí speaks about the pervasiveness of masculine values in the production, evaluation and misinterpretation of women's literature, he is in fact voicing one of the preoccupations of feminist literary criticism since its very inception. In its different versions on both sides the Atlantic (French, British, American, Latin American, etc.), feminist critical practice has attempted to discern the autonomy of women's voices in literary works. In her hypothesis about women's "different" writing the Latin American critic Marta Traba says that women's literature is not against, above nor below masculine literature, but occupies a "different space" ("Hipótesis" 21). Looking at issues of form and literary strategy may help us discern that "different space" the text occupies in relation to what were considered universal masculine values, as well as elucidate whether there is a conscious effort to undermine those values. If that is the case, we should then discern whether that effort is being done with any reservations or constraints with regard to Western masculine forms of thought. Debra Castillo reminds us that to consider the literature and writings of marginal groups as "a pale copy of the West" when they resort to Western forms and thought structures, is to adopt an essentialist position that assumes that these groups are unable to think for themselves or to create anything new (4). Castillo's feminist method for analysing the writings of Latin American women is to consider the woman writer as both subject and object of her writing, and to look at the textual strategies through which the writer creates fissures in the patriarchal ideological and linguistic realm of the text.

## II. FROM A COLLECTIVE TO A SINGULAR SUBJECT

*Victuum* relates the life story of a Mexican-American woman born in Meta street, a *barrio* of Oxnard (California). The perspective of the main character, Valentina, prevails in the work, but hardly ever through a mediating narrative voice. The novel begins with Valentina's first person account of her own birth in free direct speech.

Subsequently, however, her interventions as a story teller will be scarce and the story line will proceed through dialogue. The first part, encompassing a time period from the mid-twenties to the mid sixties, relates Valentina's childhood and adolescence in a patriarchal family with middle class aspirations and the hardships her family incurs after her father's death. In the second part, Valentina is happily married, has nine children, and has abandoned her job after a brief incursion into the professional world. This last and much more brief section relates her coming to terms with a supernatural capacity she barely explores and represses in the first part, and her development of a telepathic power that allows her to travel through time and space establishing connections with historical and intellectual figures.

Throughout practically the whole novel the language is almost "unliterary" in the sense that there is barely any figuration. Ríos's experimental style breaks with conventional narrative and story-telling techniques: her characters speak with no authorial narrative mediation and the plot develops linearly through their dialogues with hardly any temporal, spatial reference or description. The first part is a detailed account of Valentina's childhood, adolescence and family life, conferred in an extremely prosaic, simple, and occasionally dull style. The absence of description as well as the simplicity and everyday character of the dialogues result in a realistic picture of Valentina's world; in the writer's own words, "a feeling that the occurrence is happening there and then" ("Isabella Ríos" 59). As Francisco A. Lomelí has remarked, this dramatic technique gives the novel a very "auditive" character ("Isabella Ríos" 59).

Lomelí has argued that in Ríos's novel there is an incipient focus on the individual in the sense that the writer is not simply concerned with conveying a "collective self" that is representative of the whole of the community as other Chicano writers such as Tomás Rivera and Miguel Méndez do in their respective ... *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971) and *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (1974) ("Isabella Ríos" 49). Given the attention on personal development and on a character's relationship to a given cultural and familial environment, Ríos's work is closer to Rudolfo Anaya's *bildungsroman* *Bless Me Ultima*. *Victuum* can also be said to anticipate other novels by women constructed around short episodes or vignettes where the personalized, self-introspective component is even more developed such as Estela Portillo Trambley's *Rain of Scorpions and Other Stories* (1976), Sandra Cisneros's *House of Mango Street* (1985), or Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986). These narratives tend to place more emphasis on the autonomy of the female voice, and on processes of self-discovery within the Chicano/a community.

In spite of privileging the individual, *Victuum* presents a simultaneous filtering of communal voices through the narrative "I" of the protagonist. Valentina is certainly the chief character on whom our interest and the plot of the novel are focussed, but the virtual lack of self-reflexivity in the narrative process, as well as the increasing protagonism of a multiplicity of voices that reverberate through her, turn this work into a mediated collective narrative. It is in this collective dimension that the private and the public are somehow blurred. The first instance of this blurring is the hybridity of the genre in which it is written incorporating biography, autobiography and fiction. Although *Victuum* is usually categorized as a novel, it is, at least in its first part, a semi-autobiographical family chronicle in dialogue. As a native of Oxnard, Isabella Ríos (Diana López) has said that the novel is a "total self-expression of the culture from which I come" ("Isabella Ríos" 54-55), and that she writes about "what [she] know[s]":

"I write about womanhood, being a woman, because I am a woman (...)" ("Isabella Ríos" 58). Lomelí sees this work as both a psychic novel as well as a "*bildungsroman* about a Chicana" ("Isabella Ríos" 49), but he also comments on the various generic forms that intersect in this work: "it borders on the science fiction (...), the meta-physical initiation (...), the biographical (which becomes confused with the autobiographical point of view, as is done inversely in *Barrio Boy*), the historical-epic (...), the psychological and magical real (...)" ("Isabella Ríos" 49-50).

The biographical/ autobiographical dimension of the work, merging with the intent of representing a collectivity is no doubt relevant to the expression of a feminine collective selfhood. This is the story about an "I" whose source wants to be deliberately hidden from its readers. The blurring of fact and fiction is already purposely enacted in the pseudonym with which the writer, Diana López, chooses to conceal her real identity, and protect herself in order to keep the privacy of her intimate thoughts ("Isabella Ríos" 60). On the other hand, the writer is also concealing and protecting the identity of another woman from her *barrio* who she has interviewed and whose biography she is partially transcribing in the novel ("Isabella Ríos" 58). Thus, a complicity between women underlies the writing process of the novel, a process in which the writer is at once compiler, translator, mediator, biographer and autobiographer. Her own individual story merges with that of the woman whose life experience she is relating. In that translating process, a *desdoblamiento* or a "a sort of dealing with yourself through someone else" occurs (Lomelí, "Isabella Ríos" 60). The narrative "I" results from the mutual displacement and blurring of fiction writer, biographer and autobiographer. Ríos's novel reveals a characteristic of women's autobiographical writing, which, as Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenk have remarked, demonstrates a marginal position to conventional displays of the self that assume authorial power and voice. In line with other critics of women's autobiography, they argue that "self-definition in relation to significant others, is the most pervasive characteristic of the female autobiography" (9). *Victuum* retains the conventional focus on the subject, but, its narrative technique as well as the author's displacement by and identification with a real woman and a fictional character, show that that subject can only be known in relation to others. Ríos's concept of subjectivity is made manifest in this blurring of the self with the other, the personal and the collective, the real and the fictional. Françoise Lionnet has clearly exposed the reasons why autobiography may merge with or present itself as fiction:

(...) the narrator's process of reflection, narration, and self-integration within language is bound to unveil patterns of self-definition (and self-dissimulation) with which we are not always consciously familiar. (...) [T]he female narrator (...) exists in the text under circumstances of alienated communication because the text is the locus of her dialogue with a tradition she tacitly aims to subvert. (92-93)

This blending of the autobiographical and the collective, the fictional and the real is also to be looked at in the light of the historical focus of the novel. Ríos's recuperation of the history of Californios' dispossession immediately relates her to previous women writers such as Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, who explicitly denounce and lament the loss of their property, lands, traditions and customs.<sup>6</sup> The project of recovering the past through orality clearly underlies Ríos

novel as it underlies the Mexican-American Cabeza de Baca's autobiographical chronicle *We Fed Them Cactus*. *Victuum* is not merely a "psychic" novel or a novel on initiation (*bildungsroman*), focussing exclusively on an individual's lifestory. The stories of Valentina's relatives disclose the impact of a collective history of occupation on the Ríos and Ballesteros families. Through her mother and aunt, we hear about the large extensions of land that were expropriated by the Americans and about heroic, dangerous figures like the bandit Joaquín Murrieta, who defended the rights of the poor, but also had a strong hold on the people. Valentina's father dismantles the myth of the American cowboy and traces its history back to the years when Mexican had cattle ranches in the Southwest and taught Americans to guide the steer (114). He is adamant in his claim that Spanish is the official language of the Southwest and edits a newspaper in Spanish that provides a forum for the discussion of the issues that affect people of Mexican descent in the U.S. Through the figures of Adolfo and other men in the *barrio*, Ríos is establishing a link with the Chicano Movement by referring to what Gramsci has called "organic intellectuals" in the service of the Mexican people in the United States.

As "the first Chicana novel," *Victuum* might be expected to show a concern with a working class struggle—commonly identified with the cultural and social *Chicano Movement*—coupled with a particular emphasis on women's marginal position within that movement. This novel, however, does not reproduce the indigenous myths and symbols that characterized most of the cultural production ensuing from the Chicano Movement and Chicana feminism. Ríos's focus on the decline of a family claiming both Spanish ancestry and a middle-class social status, made it impossible for her to allude to the notion of Aztlán and to indigenous ways. In fact, the occupation and conquest of the territory inhabited by the indigenous peoples of America is only mentioned in passing when Adolfo acknowledges that the Indians are the original inhabitants of the area. The theme of dispossession, common to the many of the border writings of the Southwest, is dealt with by Ríos in a way that connects her more to the turn-of-the-century Californio writer M<sup>a</sup> Amparo Ruiz de Burton and the New Mexican writers of the 30s and 50s—who identify themselves with a middle-class landed gentry of Spanish origin—than to the *Chicana* literature that was beginning to emerge at the time of the publication of her novel.

We gather from Valentina's father's "rags to riches" autobiographical account at the beginning of the novel that he descends from Spanish immigrants, and, from various stories told by Valentina's mother and aunts, that the Ríos, Valentina's mother's family, used to be owners of large extensions of rancho land that were taken away from them. The lightness of Valentina's complexion, just like that of her mother's, is extolled from the very beginning of the novel, and it becomes a mark of excellence and status. In the second chapter of the novel, a distinction is made between the "Mexicans coming across the border every so often," and "the old Californians" who Valentina's mother prefers as servants (5). While Adolfo is still alive, the Ballesteros family enjoys a comfortable economic status. Adolfo makes enough money by selling liquor illegally and directing his orchestra to provide his wife and children with the conventional domestic commodities, "to keep little Bell in fine clothes and the children...plus a new washing machine...the latest...Norge...the best, no less, and an excellent Eureka vacuum...the latest model; not only does she have new fangled cleaning contraptions but she has a house-cleaner comin at her beck'n call!" (62). And yet, Isabella's middle-class aspirations are not at all satisfied in Oxnard. She yearns for

“Spanish style home” away from the “barbary area” in which Adolfo has chosen to live in order to be close to his people (102). In Meta street, a *barrio* of Mexican immigrants, the Ballesteros sisters are constantly exposed to racial discrimination both on the streets and at school, where they are prevented from speaking Spanish and are treated as “dirty Mexicans.” In such a neighborhood their reputation as respectable women is at stake since they are judged according to the stereotype the loose Mexican woman (*Victuum* 242-243). However, the respectability of the Ballesteros-Ríos family is constantly asserted with an emphasis on certain social codes which are emblematic of an educated middle class. The lady-like qualities, the dressing style and the beauty of the Ballesteros girls are the object of the *barrio* neighbors’ admiration. The girls are given a strict education to become, in their father’s words “young ladies...goddesses for a man to worship...virgin princesses” (146). School and musical education is also a sign of social status and dignity and, even after her husband’s decease, Isabella insists on giving their children an education in order to provide them with suitable marriage partners. Although after Adolfo’s death both Valentina and her mother will have to work outside their home, we are reminded of the prestige the “Maestro” enjoyed in the neighborhood and that the family comes from “good stock” (206). As if to make amends for the destitution the family has fallen into, Isabella also prides herself that they have been able to preserve their dignity by not resorting to anyone’s nor the government’s financial help (227).

As Ramón Saldívar has remarked, this patriarchal family produces women that are only capable of perpetuating traditional patriarchal structures. Through the patriarchal mother, an agent of male-dominated institutions both in the father’s presence and absence, a domestic order and the traditional role of middle-class women is maintained, which makes it difficult for them to become free of the various abuses they are subject to within their male-dominated families and communities. Certain patterns repeat themselves with a crushing inevitability throughout the story: women marry early, husbands drink and beat them up, sons are favored over daughters, men abandon and/or are unfaithful to women, women are sexually harassed by strangers. Domestic violence is an important theme of the story and a constant in almost all marriages. Valentina’s sister Veve runs away with Lucero and marries him “because she felt people would talk” (80) only to be exposed to his drunken attacks of jealousy. Isabel also elopes and marries very young in spite of her mother’s warning about “the life that awaits her” (200). The title of the novel, *Victuum*, punning on the word “victim” refers not only to Valentina’s victimization, but also to the victimization of the network of women to whom Valentina relates, trapped between the patriarchal exigencies of a middle-class model of conduct, and the unsafe, abusive environment of Meta street. Only in tía Petra’s house does Valentina find a refuge from the harsh disciplinary environment of her home and from the restrictions that will make a “lady” out of her (100). Petra is, as Isabella Ríos herself has stated, “a tough woman, although feminine” (“Isabella Ríos” 57). Petra adopts a defensive, challenging attitude in the face of domestic violence or any kind of abuse against her female relatives. She provides Valentina with a potential model of conduct that may adapt male roles to a related but different female experience; a model that, in the end, Valentina does not follow.

After Adolfo’s death, domesticity becomes increasingly oppressive for the main character. The rebellious tomboy who had previously resented doing household duties and had cut her eyelashes so as not to be subject to men’s stares, has now been

“domesticated” and follows her mother’s severe dictates by the book. Valentina’s mother Isabella is now in charge of providing for the family while also having to demonstrate that she retains all her respectability in spite of her husband’s death. By intensifying dramatically the discipline in the Ballesteros family after Adolfo’s demise, Ríos does not intend to criticize women who cannot imagine themselves outside the patriarchal family structure in spite of the absence of male authority. Neither does she offer alternative visions of female identity once the supposedly repressive figure, the husband, is missing. Instead, she seems to be more interested in giving a “realistic” portrayal of how a family run by a woman complicit with patriarchal ideology manages to survive as well as to maintain the middle-class identity on which their inmost sense of dignity and identity depends.

As Kari Boyd McBride has stated, women cannot be placed only in the limited context of the factory-worker family or in clear-cut categories of class or of private-public spheres as most feminist Marxist analyses do.<sup>7</sup> Women in rural and urban contexts don’t actually live in a world of clear boundaries, even though the ideal of domesticity for both the upper and lower classes establishes such boundaries. Many women have contributed to their family’s economies, but always within the limitations of the role that suited a certain class identity and a class structure. Boyd points out that the cult of domesticity was “a pseudoreligious ideal for women of both middle and lower classes,” and that such ideal preserved the myth of women’s domestic nature, while, in fact, the public and private merged in their lives (93). Following a study by Dorothy Smith, Boyd argues that class consciousness is maintained through a system of codes that is not associated to production. Such codes —home decoration, dressing, speech conventions— distinguish one class from another. Boyd argues that there is a particular effort in maintaining such a system in times of economic hardship and crisis, for at those times, income alone is not enough to maintain class distinctions. Consequently, in the realm of domesticity where sex and not class is the basic category conditioning the type of work women do, it is not work what separates a class from another, but the cultural codes through which women understand their work and construct it socially. The question to ask is, therefore, how a wife defines her relationship to class through the codification of her work and her place within the ideologies of domesticity of her time.

Given the lack of economic solvency of the family and Isabella’s temporary loss of her home, the emphasis on cleanliness, domesticity, discipline and hard work in the second part of the first section of the novel should be seen as social codes through which Isabella, Valentina’s mother, is trying to prove the fantasy of her superior standing as a middle-class woman. The *barrio* of Meta street becomes even more menacing to her and her family’s identity now that they may be seen as one of the many poor Mexican families living on the street. Her refusal to marry below her former husband’s social standing is one more assertion of the identity she wants to preserve: “(...) I could never marry anyone...why not after having a man like your father... (...); I could never have another... besides your father was cultured, educated, handsome...” (165). Isabella’s strictness, mirroring that of her husband could probably be seen, as Ramón Saldívar has argued, as an attempt to compensate for Adolfo’s absence (178). To expand Saldívar’s comment, I would say that what Isabella tries to compensate for is not so much a lacking male authority, but the status that the presence of the male figure had so far ensured. Thus, Isabella’s hardening of domestic discipline is a way of proving that, in spite of Adolfo’s death and the economic difficulties that have



followed it, the domestic order and arrangements of a middle-class family are still being maintained. She becomes the mouthpiece and the custodian of the middle-class values that her marriage to Adolfo had granted her. Even though Valentina and her sisters have had to go to the fields and work with the migrant workers, she dissociates herself from the darker Mexicans as a way to assert her higher social standing. The Ballesteros's forced abandonment of their home and their temporary migrant status is particularly traumatic, since *home* is in fact the most important signifier of economic status and social dignity. Even after the recovery of their house, they cannot enjoy the privacy of a middle-class family as their difficult financial situation forces them to have boarders that expose them to constant danger. The coming together of the private and the public, of domesticity and business under their own roof are an indication, in Boyd MacBride's words, that "a boarding house is not a home." However, Isabella fights to preserve the dignity that corresponds to the status she claims for herself by stressing cleanliness and discipline in the domestic sphere, and the importance of education for her children.

As the following excerpt from a conversation between Valentina and her uncle suggests, education is not so much a way of securing a woman's independence and resourcefulness as a way for her to attain a certain social position and then be able to marry somebody that is not "some ol' bum from around here!," someone who does not belong to the "Barbary area" of Meta street: "...that's what you should learn... how to be a business woman! Then invest your profit in property...you'd be sitting pretty...marry some nice Jewish boy...I know many that would be a good catch, believe me...they make the best husbands; they provide for their families...let me tell you!" (246). A "good catch" is a woman's social vehicle towards a respectable condition and the novel enacts such a "happy" ending for its protagonist. The culmination of Valentina's life in marriage and motherhood is realistic if we consider the times in which it is set and the social aspirations of those the novel describes. As the writer herself has said, Valentina's marriage and nine children are to be expected considering she comes from a Catholic background ("Isabella Ríos" 58).

As is expected from the euphoric version of the conventional plot of the female *bildungsroman*, a man provides the heroine Valentina with her ultimate destiny by marrying her. Ríos apparently succumbs to the only social alternative that privileged women have imagined to overcome social oppression. As Carolyn Heilbrun has suggested, while Black American writings have envisioned utopian places, it has been very difficult for women who considered themselves socially privileged to imagine their future otherwise than through marriage (67). In the case of Mexican-Americans, we said at the beginning of our discussion that Aztlán would have made no sense for those who are white and identify with the Spaniards and their history. The internalization of patriarchal standards by privileged women, Heilbrun points out, has caused them to shrink from claiming the responsibilities they have born or from acknowledging that they have ever been ambitious. Instead, they have looked for male approval of their actions (69). In a similar line, Valentina's entrepreneurial abilities, strength and intellect are only a way of proving her worth to a man, an avenue towards marriage and, consequently, are ultimately dissipated by it.

In the second part of *Victuum*, however, Ríos shows her dissatisfaction with the necessary plight to which her main character is destined by writing, to use Rachel Blau Duplessis's term, "beyond the ending." Valentina's escape from the domestic and familial sphere into the telepathic is only possible after she has complied with the

middle-class social norms and has married, in her mother's words, "the right man, ...a kind man...with principles... with beliefs that are similar to yours... that he be ambitious...that he wants to accomplish something" (233). Once she has consolidated her position in society by finding the "right" husband, and has fulfilled her role as mother and wife, Valentina escapes the rules of the middle-class family and pursues her telepathic journey almost always under the guidance of a masculine figure. In this critique of the romance plot, Ríos's novel anticipates, as Saldívar has argued, the critiques to come of both Anglo and Chicano patriarchy by subsequent Mexican American women writers (181).

The feminist vindications implicit in the novel are nevertheless still far removed from those to be made by women of color and Chicana feminists. Unlike Ríos, they have explicitly pointed at the interdependence and the mutual conditioning of the public and private spheres. Although the first part of Ríos's novel is a significant attempt to merge the private and the public in a simultaneous account of communal and domestic life, there is no commentary on the ways they interrelate. For *Victuum* basically treats patriarchy as something occurring at the "private" level and being suffered by women, whereas complaints against racial and social discrimination and the American government are presented as "public" issues to be dealt with by men. In Ríos's work, men speak about the people and the community much more often than women do. The concerns of women in Valentina's family, and in particular those of the mother, are "private" in the sense that they encompass exclusively the realm of the home and the problems that ensue when the domestic order is disrupted after the father's death. According to Valentina's mother, domestic order comes with a good marriage, and a good marriage can only occur outside the social realm that has been imposed on them: "...your Papa always believed in living among his people! But then, it doesn't help as far as raising children... (...) children must be raised in the best possible area...away from rif-raff...so that when they grow up they may meet the right mate to marry..." (234). The split between the "public", "communal" concerns of men, and the "private" concerns of women that the novel itself enacts, is an indication of Ríos's internalization of a patriarchal ideology that excluded women and their concerns from Mexican-American/Chicano social movements. The split is also a sign of the writer's association of women with a "universal" middle-class familial model. The writer's pen-name —Isabella Ríos— might be seen as an indication of the writer's identification with the racial and class attitudes of the women in the Ríos family. It is therefore no accident that the feminist proposal of the utopian ending of the novel should be made in terms of middle-class feminism.

Ríos's writes "beyond the ending" of the conventional female *bildungsroman* that resolves individual and communal aspirations in marriage by transporting Valentina to a fantastic, mental, a-historical realm. This fantastic flight is a rejection, an escape and therefore a critique of a particular Mexican/Chicano form of patriarchy that has incorporated a middle-class patriarchal culture, and that has denied women the access to education and knowledge. What Saldívar calls "hegemonic dreams," the dreams of the Western Cartesian subject of knowledge, are indeed appropriated by Ríos. As we have seen, the importance of the Cartesian subject is emphasized throughout the novel and even more so in the second part, not so much to vindicate women's right to the knowledge and education that are denied to them by the institutions of patriarchy, as to make certain class distinctions from the rest of the neighborhood. There is not only an emphasis on the superior class Valentina belongs to, but also on the particu-

larity and distinctiveness of her knowledge and abilities. By transforming her character's spiritual and supernatural powers into a telepathy with the great figures of Western history and knowledge, Ríos now claims that Cartesian subject of knowledge for her female character in order to satisfy her repressed wishes to know, learn and be independent as a "public" individual in a traditional patriarchal sense.<sup>8</sup>

Doris Sommer's distinction between the metonymic identification of the "I" in testimonial narratives and the metaphoric identification of the "I" in autobiographical works is particularly useful here for describing the textual turn from a collective to a single subject in the novel, as well as for looking at the political implications of such turn. Sommer speaks of "lateral" or metonymic identification "through relationship" that characterizes the collective self of *testimonios*, a self that sees itself as an extension of a community where there might be multiple differences (108-111). She opposes this self to the self who has a metaphoric relationship to her community, and who sees herself as an exceptional, modellic part of the whole, has a heroic relationship to it, and stands out from the rest (108). The first self, who introduces other communal voices into the public sphere and supplements official history through an oral rhetoric, I would relate tangentially to the self that is displayed in the first part of the novel. Although, as we have said, Valentina's exceptionality is occasionally mentioned in the first part, she depends on other communal and family figures for her self-definition. The second self, who portrays herself as glorious and outstanding, prevails in the second part.<sup>9</sup>

If the novel is initially centered on a secluded, oppressive domestic life in a *barrio* where Valentina—as is implied occasionally—should not live, in the second part, this character transcends both social and domestic barriers to access a "public", "universal" knowledge. But the temporal and spatial vacuum in which this knowledge is attained does not allow for its association to the institutions and societal norms that are so present throughout the first part of the novel. The surprising change of register in the second section attests to a significant change in perspective. In contrast with the simple, practical, oral and unsophisticated register of the first part, there is an obsession with theorization, classification, naming and illustration in the second part. It is almost as though Ríos has wanted to prove that her character can understand all kind of disciplinary phallogocentric jargons (the literary, scientific, religious, philosophical, mythological). Valentina comes in contact with famous figures of human history who provide protracted, sometimes inchoate disquisitions about their respective theories of knowledge in an indoctrinating, instructive manner. Valentina attains a "general" wealth of knowledge, which apparently fulfills her so far repressed wish to know, but no consideration is given as to *how* that new form of knowledge and criteria might change the social predicament of women in her community.

*Victuum* may be included in two of the categories of fiction delineated by Rachel Blau Duplessis: fictions of "collective protagonists" and "speculative fictions." The former replace individual heroes or sealed couples with groups, which have a sense of purpose and identity, and whose growth occurs in mutual collaboration. The use of a collective protagonist may imply that problems or issues that we see as individually based are in fact social in cause and in cure (Duplessis 196). Although, as was said earlier on, the focus of Ríos's novel is Valentina's individual growth, we cannot understand her development and her life if it is not in relation to all the voices she reproduces. I therefore insist on the "collective" oral dimension of the first part of Ríos novel that links it to other contemporary Chicano/a works of fiction. The second

category outlined by Duplessis includes fictions that challenge the world as we know it, through science fiction, telepathic communication, fantasy, etc. “to estrange readers from the rules of the world as known —both laws of physics and laws of society, everything from causality to propriety” (179). The second part of Ríos’s *Victuum*, in which Valentina develops her psychic powers to the point of establishing telepathic contact with historical, mythical and fictional figures falls into this second category.

Duplessis argues that female authors have used the unverifiable, uncanny and spiritual realms to portray changes in consciousness. Calling into play a future consciousness, telepathic powers, and parallel lives to ours is a way of narrating “muted alternatives” to the psychological and social forms that shape our personal consciousness (180). In these other times and spaces, muted groups, values and institutions become dominant. Through them, alternatives to the actual social organization are envisioned in other worlds, socially repressed values become hegemonic, and power relations are reversed (186). Ríos’s use of the fantastic in a way that reminds us of science fiction is certainly targeted towards the destabilization of the societal gender patterns that her female character had accepted with submission and compliance. The last section transgresses the *bildungsroman* plot in that Valentina abandons the traditional role of mother and wife and devotes her time to learning and being instructed by a variety of mainly masculine figures. Her mother, with whom she used to have a spiritual connection, is suddenly no longer present in Valentina’s thoughts; and her husband, who understands her spiritual gift, is also left behind. These two figures, representative of the middle-class familial order under which Valentina has been instructed to live, become conspicuously absent during Valentina’s telepathic escape. Her children, together with her wifely and motherly obligations also cease to be mentioned. The problematization of the confinement of women to the domestic realm is only possible within an ahistorical realm where no spacial nor temporal references are made, and where the character is not subject to either biological or social constraints.

At the textual level, the novel is divided into what is tangible, concrete, material and actual, and what’s only possible, imaginable, and desirable; this split corresponds to the shift from a collective self to a single self. It is precisely in this division and this shift that Ríos’s ambivalence as regards her feminist political commitment is revealed. *Victuum* does not, as Duplessis says of other science fiction works by women, reverse or change the relationship between the dominating and the dominated; nor does it imagine an alternative to that relationship as most feminist and science fiction utopias do. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915), to give an example, is one of the first self-consciously feminist utopias the public and the private spheres have merged through the institutionalization of maternal values. While particular masculinist values and patriarchy of the turn of the century are referred to and taken to task in *Herland*, *Victuum* does away entirely with cultural referents of the present, so that they do not have to be reversed, problematized, questioned or defamiliarized. Ríos uses science fiction and utopia so as to envision her character’s individual fulfilment, but does not exploit the potential of this genre for imagining radically different social orders or for translating the representations of gender of the present to the future.

Valentina goes on a kind of passive epic quest for knowledge through the tutelage of various reputable masters, and reaches a final climactic stage under the direction of a kind of prophetic figure, Victuum, who, in the last page of the novel, foretells the coming of a better world and of a “projecting sound of feminitude” that will have the

“primary position of influence upon the planet earth” (345). After *Victuum*, the “victim” is transformed into a knowledgeable “victor.” Nevertheless, *Victuum*’s ambiguous predictions do not describe how in this new order to come, current sexual, social and political problems as the ones described in the first part will be dealt with. Although the text affirms the need for social change, Valentina is a mere observer and passive recipient of knowledge about a future, mythical world where the spiritual and the scientific will combine harmoniously as in a magic trick. Women’s power will come with technology, but there is no questioning of the position of women in a technological society or no reflection of how that is to transform their traditional roles in a positive or negative manner. Cultural constructions of gender identity are not an issue to be questioned and, thus, remain untouched. Unlike in Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, in Ríos’s utopian realm there is no real questioning of the assumptions behind patriarchy. Instead, the novel explores the psychic powers of an individual who happens to transcend those roles through them. Given the structural progression of the novel from the material and the fantastic, from the collective to the individual, the suggestion seems to be that social change is more a matter of individual interest and power than of wider social groups and movements.

### III. CONCLUSION

As the first contemporary Chicana novel, *Victuum* is to be considered a transitional work anticipating what eventually will be called Chicana feminism. On the one hand, it endorses some of the preoccupations of the Chicano movement, acts as a reminder of a collective history of oppression and occupation, and denounces American institutional policies towards the population of Mexican origin. Most importantly, it offers a realistic portrayal of Mexican-American women’s middle-class aspirations and their internalization of traditional roles of mother, lady, and wife as the only way for them to attain domestic order and escape social oppression. At the same time, Valentina’s fantastic experience in the last section of the novel contains an implicit challenge to women’s lack of intellectual freedom and proposes a new order in which women, still following men’s guidance and mentorship, have access to the “public” world of knowledge through intuition and telepathy, where the constraints of marriage and domesticity do not seem to exist.

The textual ambiguities in *Victuum* reveal the contradictions between the feminist, Chicano, and middle-class affiliations of the writer. These affiliations are prioritized in different moments in the text, but none of them is ever fully developed with enough vehemence to become an ideological project. The shift from the “realist” representation of Valentina’s family and *barrio* life and from the *bildungsroman* or initiation plot to the genre of science fiction or fantasy, shows, on the one hand, a wish to destabilize and escape from socially constructed gender norms, while it is also indicative of a feminist stance that defends women’s intellectual freedom as individuals. On the other, however, the fact that the transgression of gender, social and racial relations occurs in the telepathic psychic level, shows Ríos incapacity to propose solutions to the problems she illustrates.

In *Victuum* the private and the public remain separate entities not only at the representational level but also at the textual level. The focus on individual mental

development prevailing in the novel results in the privileging of the rational Cartesian subject with a virtual absence or a very limited presence of ideological contestation. In the first part, the voice of the author, the protagonist and the collectivity merge in what seems a semi(auto)biographical communal chronicle where the writer, the narrating, and the narrated subject dissolve. The second section, leaving aside the social and domestic constraints of Valentina's past, is exclusively devoted to her intellectual progress. Although the novel expresses profound anxieties about the discrimination suffered by the Mexican-American community in the U.S., and about women's oppression within the family, it does not proffer, as succeeding writings by Chicanas will, an explicit connection between the the social situation of women, patriarchy, and other social problems within the Mexican-American community. The stress on Valentina's exceptional moral values, intelligence and singular psychic abilities, which reaches a climax in the second part of the work, and the final emphasis on a single over a collective subject, suggest that *Victuum* does not so much intend to propose a resistance to given ideological structures as to show the power of an individual to transcend them.

## Notes

1. Lomelí argues that depending on whether a work had been published in 1815, 1831 or 1848, it could have been labeled as Hispanic, Mexican or American (245). The term "Chicano literature" started to be used in the 1960s and 1970s, ensuing from the task of cultural and historical rediscovery and reinvention carried out by the Chicano movement. In spite of the suspicion that the terms "rediscovery" and "reinvention" may awaken, Lomelí comments on the right of Chicanos to write and recover their history, and on the difficulty of claiming an autonomous "proper literary history," "when various degrees of conquest, assimilation, mixture, cooptation, intermarriage and adaptation have taken place within a society partly responsible for erasing our past" (228).
2. These symbolic identifications are not without contradictions. The notion of Aztlán was historically unfounded, and the indigenist emphasis of the movement is at odds with a generalized ignorance of Mexican history and culture from which Chicanos have borrowed their symbols. Likewise, the repudiation of the Spanish father is in contradiction with Chicanos' vindication of the Spanish language as a source of unity. See Alex Zaragoza's comments on Chicano essentialism in a forthcoming essay included in the volume *Culture and Power: Business*, to be published by CENUAN (Madrid).
3. For an analysis on the importance of the figure of Malinche in the constitution of a Chicana feminist discourse in literature see Norma Alarcon's "Traduttora, Tradittora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism," *Cultural Critique* 13 (1989): 57-87.
4. See Lomelí's "Chicana Novelists" and "Isabella Ríos and the Chicano Psychic Novel."
5. See Ramón Saldívar's chapter "The Dialectics of Subjectivity" in *The Dialectics of Difference*.
6. "Californio" is the term used to refer to the inhabitants of California of Spanish descent.
7. Following Marx, Dolores Hayden says that women's labor in the household does not necessarily alienate them as much as men's labor in a capitalistic society (92). According to Hayden, housework would be more meaningful than factory work because of its association with childcare, something over which the woman has control. Hayden claims that women are only alienated when they are excluded from the institutions that "shape the cultural world in accord with their own dynamic" or when women have to combine factory work with domestic labor (92). Boyd rightly argues that this romantic view of

housework does not help us understand why women are subordinate participants in public dialogues, and how their work in the home is valued in their culture.

8. In *The Disorder of Women* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989) Carole Pateman explains the patriarchal sense of the notion of public citizenship. The construct of the political subject or citizen is tacitly dependent on the division of "civil" society between the private and the public spheres of life. In the field of political theory, for instance, the public sphere is taken as an autonomous *sui generis* realm that may be analysed and talked about independently of the domestic realm (3).
9. I am aware that novel and testimonial narrative are indeed very different genres. Since Ríos's novel is semiautobiographical, and since she herself has said that in her novel she partially transcribed what an illiterate woman of her neighborhood told her, I believe Sommer's distinction to be very pertinent to my analysis. Ríos's role is only to some extent comparable to that of other transcribers Sommer speaks about such as Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, Margaret Randall or Claribel Alegría who have interviewed and compiled the interviews with Latin American women that make up what we know today as "testimonio." Elena Poniatowska would be another interesting analogy for she novelized the testimony of Jesusa Palancares. Although Ríos's role may be similar to that of these translators, the concept of subjectivity and the degree of political commitment that she exposes in this work differs radically from the one they propose.

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