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# The transnational feminist literature of Helena Maria Viramontes

Christina Marie Buckles  
*University of Iowa*

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THE TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST LITERATURE OF  
HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES

by

Christina Marie Buckles

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Interdisciplinary Studies - Master of Arts degree in  
Transnational Literature in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

July 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Astrid Oesmann

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Christina Marie Buckles

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the  
Interdisciplinary Studies - Master of Arts degree in  
Transnational Literature  
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## INTRODUCTION

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Helena María Viramontes transports her readers to the fields of California, amidst the swirling dust and under a scorching sun. The work is grueling, and readers follow the characters as they pick fruit and care for their families. On a particularly hot day, Petra, the mother, and Estrella, her daughter, meander through a general store. They negotiate how they will spend their money, as they check the prices of El Pato Tomato sauce, Carnation Milk, Tang, and Spam. In this short passage, readers are reminded of the daily uncertainties this family faces, including the food they will eat; ironically, Petra must buy her groceries on credit, although her family picks the produce which sustains others. These women are surrounded by tomatoes and apples, in the store and in the fields, but cannot nourish their family with these and other fruits and vegetables.

Readers are also introduced to Perfecto Flores, or Perfect Flowers, as he romantically plucks one bulb out of a mound of garlic, which smells of rosewater, and gives it to Petra, who ingests garlic by the pound to combat her bulging varicose veins. He shares ice with the younger children of the family who wait outside, a rarity for them in this hot climate and their applianceless home. Perfecto is a male figure and father who is defined by generosity and hard work, and who will significantly influence Estrella and her development; as a character, his demeanor contrasts with earlier representations of masculinity in Viramontes's texts, contributing to the multiplicity of masculinity that she presents. Viramontes describes how fieldwork has ravaged the bodies of Petra

and Perfecto as they stroll through the store, for they appear much older than they are. In this novel, as in much of her work, Viramontes makes visible invisible women and workers, including their daily lives, their labor, and their dreams.

Viramontes's writing makes an invaluable contribution to Chicana literature. Her stories often resist a rigid progression of time and "experiment with shifting points of view, interweaving various characters' perspectives" (Yarbro-Bejarano 21). They tend to involve young women, on the brink of adulthood, and are often set in East Los Angeles. The characters that she creates are not "idealized versions of feminists successfully battling patriarchy," they are "a contradictory blend of strengths and weaknesses" (Yarbro-Bejarano 10).

Viramontes has published two novels, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) and *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007), as well as many short stories, eight of which are the contents of *The Moths and Other Stories* (1985). She is recognized by her peers "as one of the most socially and politically conscious writers of today" (Sandoval 65). Her writing is personal and political, as she writes for and about Chicanas.

Anna Marie Sandoval, in *Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas*, presents a feminist reading of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, as well as contemplates the connections between Mexicana and Chicana feminism and literature. She proposes a comparative framework, demonstrating "how works by Mexicanas and Chicanas present a political and theoretical agenda undermining the patriarchy and calling for coalitions across borders" (Sandoval 18). In this thesis, I am similarly interested in transnational feminist scholarship and dialogue.

Through close readings of Viramontes's texts, I place her writing in conversation with several transnational feminist scholars and themes. I begin with home, a frequently discussed topic within transnational feminism, as the experiences of diasporic and migrant populations challenge the notion of home. I locate the multiple homes presented in Viramontes's texts, arguing that these homes are unreliable spaces for their residents. I then consider male characters and masculinity in Viramontes's stories, as these men significantly influence the homes of women. In Viramontes's later texts, some of these characters support the women in their lives, as well as embrace the multiplicity of masculinity. I also explore invisibility and hypervisibility, two themes which figure prominently within transnational feminism and Viramontes's texts. Viramontes makes visible women, workers, and youth, challenging their invisibility and hypervisibility. In my analysis, I include Viramontes's two novels, as well as two short stories, "Growing" (1983) and "The Jumping Bean" (1992). I chose these texts because of their engagement with the themes I discuss, although much of Viramontes's writing contemplates these topics. By analyzing these works, which were published over a period of twenty four years, we can more intricately see Viramontes's exploration of transnational feminist themes.

In the remainder of this introduction, I first more fully outline the structure of this thesis and the arguments of the three chapters that follow. I then define transnational feminism and introduce Chicana feminism, highlighting the intersections between these feminisms and Viramontes's texts. Finally, I briefly



contextualize the history of Chicana literature and many of the social, political, and economic events and movements that are relevant to Viramontes's work.

In chapter one, I focus on the multiplicity and unreliability of home. I draw on the scholarship of Anannya Bhattacharjee and her three manifestations of home: "the (conventional) domestic sphere of the heterosexual and patriarchal family," the extended ethnic community, and the nation of origin (341). I then locate these homes in Viramontes's work, arguing that they are ultimately unreliable. The homes of migrant workers are temporary and transitory, as they constantly shift from one location to the next, and are created out of whatever materials or structures are available. Urban homes are threatened by internal and external forces, including patriarchal figures, nature, and environmental racism. The extended ethnic community is under attack, due to the exploitation of workers and police brutality. Some characters wish to return to a more distant home, the nation of origin, but reaching this home is often difficult. Other characters reside in their nation of origin, the United States, but this home does not pause to recognize citizenship, only acknowledging race and class, as these characters are policed and a lack of citizenship is assumed. Citizenship, therefore, becomes painful and unreliable as well. Home is unstable, a space that the characters in many of Viramontes's texts cannot count on.

These homes are significantly influenced by their male residents. In chapter two, I trace the evolution of Viramontes's male characters through her writing. Often, male characters in Viramontes's texts are transnational ones, with connections to Mexico and the United States. Initially these characters are

persistently patriarchal and sometimes absent, but their presence twists and grows, and soon certain characters support the women they interact with. They begin to recognize the rigid gender roles that attempt to constrict women's lives. Some of these male characters also traverse gender boundaries, caring little for the patriarchal scripts that their fathers and grandfathers live by. They are not activists, but they are hopeful, feminist characters, who embrace the multiplicity of masculinity.

In chapter three, I apply the concepts of invisibility and hypervisibility to several of Viramontes's works. Many of the male characters in Viramontes's texts contribute to the invisibility of women within the family home and extended ethnic community. At other times, men and women are similarly impacted by outside forces, including agribusiness and La Migra (immigration police). Women, workers, and youth are made invisible, via immigration laws, sexism, racism, and classism. When these characters are left with no recourse or recognition, and as a result act strongly, at times violently, they become hypervisible. Additionally, the media and police brutality make these individuals hypervisible. Viramontes fights invisibility in her stories, striving for visibility, rather than hypervisibility<sup>1</sup>. The daily acts of resistance performed by women, and Viramontes's writing about them, assert their visibility, as they recognize their circumstances and imagine a new future.

Before proceeding, I will first locate myself as the author of this thesis. Chicana authors and literary critics alike have commented on why they write. Sandoval quotes Viramontes, as Viramontes explains her intentions:

I myself invent time by first conjuring up the voices and the spirits of the women living under brutal repressive regimes...[b]ecause I want to do justice to their voices. To tell these women, in my own gentle way, that I will fight for them, that they provide me with my own source of humanity. (ix)

This writing carries with it a sense of responsibility, and is not simply an academic exercise; Viramontes views her writing as an act of solidarity and activism. Similarly, Sandoval “wish[es] to give voice to the women who, for whatever reasons, cannot tell their stories” (ix). Chandra Talpade Mohanty urges scholars to situate themselves in relation to their work, which the above authors do, both through these quotes and other introductory remarks. Therefore, I am a white woman who resides in the North, and is part of the Two-Thirds World (Mohanty 226-227)<sup>2</sup>. I write about literature because I often see in it what I feel are some of the clearest depictions of our world and humanity. Barbara Christian, in her famous essay “The Race for Theory,” states, “I think we need to read the works of our writers in our various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race and gender in the literature...Because I write about writers who are now writing, I hope to help ensure that their tradition has continuity and survives” (2130; 2136). I also believe that by discussing and writing about literature, we ensure continuity and build community, better understanding the lived experiences around us.

### Intersections of Literature and Feminisms

Transnational feminist thought is prevalent in Viramontes’s texts. Marylee Reynolds defines transnational feminism as the following:

A transnational feminist analysis...connects the multiple intersecting identities of individual women—race, class, gender,

culture, and nation—with the processes of globalization, militarism, patriarchy, and neocolonialism, and places the experiences of women of color at the center of the analysis. (73)

Viramontes's stories provide this type of analysis, as they theorize about the lives of young Chicanas. They introduce us to these women and the multiple, intersecting facets of their identities as they make sense of the world around them, often recognizing the patriarchal constraints that bear on their lives. Sandoval frames her discussion of *Under the Feet of Jesus* by aligning her argument with transnational feminism and Mohanty's *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism*. She notes that "for third world women, resistance is a daily practice, and that practice is living theory. That practice is not only theorized, but the materiality of oppression becomes the focus of the discourse" (Sandoval 66). Mohanty has defined U.S. "minority" communities as part of the Third World, in solidarity with other Third World communities and countries. Thus, the resistance that Viramontes's characters enact is not rooted in a middle-class feminism, but a transnational feminism that emerges from daily acts of resistance.

Chicana feminism resonates with transnational feminism in a very fundamental way. Sandoval comments on the intersection of transnational feminism and Chicana studies: "the intellectual field is not always a receptive one; transnational feminist scholarship is still a new phenomenon, although Chicano/a studies has always been a transnational endeavor" (93). Within Border Studies and border theory, there has been a great deal of transnational writing by Chicana feminists, including Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational text *Borderlands / La*

*Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In this text, Anzaldúa proposes ‘a new consciousness,’ and a new way of theorizing for Chicanas (Saldívar-Hull 59). Sonia Saldívar-Hull analyzes Anzaldúa’s work, as well as stresses the value of solidarity as Chicana feminists work toward similar goals as other Third World feminists. She suggests that the various communities of the United States—Chicanas, African Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous Americans—“in short, the muted cultures of the United States,” should form a ‘family of resemblance,’ and work to resist oppression together (Saldívar-Hull 53). This solidarity should extend beyond the United States, to other communities throughout the world. Saldívar-Hull clarifies that this feminism is more than “a theoretical position; it is also an articulation of political solidarity between Third World women in the United States and women such as the Bolivian Domitila Barrios de Chungara, Rigoberta Menchú of Guatemala, and Elvia Alvarado from Honduras” (54). Saldívar-Hull’s call for solidarity is one in which other transnational feminist scholars, including Mohanty, are also invested. Throughout this thesis, I reference Saldívar-Hull and other Chicana feminists, as well as their transnational feminist theory.

The terms “Chicana” and “feminism,” however, are not ones that can be assumed preferable by all authors and activists; similarly, we must “remember that there is not one monolithic Chicano/a experience in the United States” (Saldívar-Hull 69). In this work I use the word “Chicana” as it is associated with a particular body of literature. On a personal level, though, some “women of Mexican descent in the nineties [and beyond] do not apply the term Chicana to

themselves seeing it as an outdated expression weighed down by the particular radicalism of the seventies” (Castillo 10). For example, Ana Castillo instead employs the “ethnic and racial definition of Mexic Amerindian” in her work (10). Rather than using the phrase Chicana feminism, Castillo introduces the term “Xicanisma,” which refers to a similar concept (11). She explains,

In recent years the idea of Chicana feminism has been taken up by the academic community where I believe it has fallen prey to theoretical abstractions. Eventually I hope that we can rescue Xicanisma from the suffocating atmosphere of conference rooms, the acrobatics of academic terms and concepts and carry it out to our work place, social gatherings, kitchens, bedrooms, and society in general. (Castillo 11)

Viramontes’s stories, I believe, have fulfilled this wish—one may find them on a bedroom nightstand or as the topic of work or social gatherings. Her stories are captivating and accessible, addressing a wide range of readers, from high school kids to adult public library patrons and university professors. In an effort to make connections between Chicana literature and other transnational feminist scholarship, this thesis will use the phrase transnational feminism, but is certainly interested in education and activism.

#### Chicana History and Literature: A Brief Overview

In *Women Singing in the Snow*, Tey Diana Rebolledo undertakes a cultural analysis of Chicana literature from 1848 to the mid-1990’s. Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero also published *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, which includes a thorough introduction and numerous pieces from a wide range of authors. From these two sources, a history of the Chicana literary tradition emerges. Naturally, this tradition is heavily influenced by political and

economic events, particularly those that occurred in what is currently the southwest United States.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848, concluding the Mexican-American War and ceding nearly one third of Mexico's territory to the United States. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, one of the characters, Alejo, is referred to as Alejo Hidalgo, referencing this treaty and history<sup>3</sup>. Arianne Burford reminds us that with this treaty, the U.S. government "promised Mexicanos citizenship and rights to their land, but in reality denied people their land claims" (par. 23). This, coupled with intense migration during the 19th century to the West, brought about incredible change. Racial and religious prejudice were strong among Anglos, and many landowning and affluent Mexicanos would become impoverished, if not immediately, over time (Rebolledo and Rivero 9).

While literature written by Hispana/Mexicana women during this time is sparse, there are oral histories which contribute to the literary tradition. During the 1870's, the California Bancroft collection was created when historian Hubert H. Bancroft and his assistants recorded oral histories in California and the Southwest, at least twelve of which were narratives or testimonials by women. These narratives tend to illuminate the survival skills of women, and in some cases are "voices of resistance, anger, and loss" (Rebolledo 13). Rebolledo notes that Rosaura Sánchez describes these forgotten narratives as 'silenced voice, the voice of the subaltern' (12), as they have only been "rediscovered" in the last decade. Also, Sánchez argues that these testimonials are 'doubly voiced'

because they were recorded by the interviewer and then translated into English (Rebolledo 12).

The Mexican Revolution, which endured from 1910 until approximately 1924, also impacted the West and Southwest, as Mexicanos left Mexico and settled in the United States. Spanish-language newspapers, which were prevalent throughout the Southwest, printed poetry, narratives, and essays written by women. Poetry was the most popular, and poems often followed the norms of the era, including literary movements and “female” assumed topics: Romanticism, Modernism, elegies, occasion poems, and tributes to family members and cultural symbols (Rebolledo 21). These articles sometimes heralded women’s rights, but Juanita Lawhn reminds us that pieces typically passed through male dominated publishers and editorial boards, and may therefore be censored (Rebolledo 21). Carmen Celia Beltrán of Tucson, Arizona, is a well-known poet who began her career in the 1920’s, with poetry that was published in newspapers; she continued to write into the 1990’s.

The 1920’s through the 1940’s were years of upheaval, due to the Mexican Revolution, the Great Depression, and the First and Second World Wars. The Federal Writers’ Project was a New Deal program of the Works Progress Administration that, similar to the Bancroft Narratives, collected oral histories during the 1930’s and 1940’s in New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, preserving information about the lives, education, traditions, folktales, and roles of women (Rebolledo 13). In New Mexico, the Federal Writers’ Project additionally collected oral folktales and songs known as cuentos<sup>4</sup> or ‘estorias’



(Rebolledo 14). The richness of this collection contributes to our understanding of women's roles in the literary tradition; sometimes these women could not read or write, but were often storytellers. One particular project, "Some New Mexico Grandmothers," amasses stories from women who were mainly in their seventies and eighties. Rebolledo explains that "many contemporary Chicana writers are 'first-generation' writers who are telling the estorias of their mothers and grandmothers, thus preserving this oral tradition" (14). Some of these tales were concerned with regulating female behavior, but at the same time may have expressed dissent, questioned the roles of women, and provided the opportunity for women (storytellers) to exercise "power over and within their world" (Rebolledo 16). Many of these cuentos involved popular female figures and heroines, such as "the *curandera* (folk healer), the *bruja* (witch), and mythic female ghost figures such as La Larga and La Llorona" (Rebolledo 16; her emphasis).

Also during this time (and beyond), from the 1930's through the 1950's, Nuevomexicana (New Mexico) writers, such as Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert, Nina Otero-Warren, and Cleofas Jaramillo, were expressing their resistance to assimilation, by writing about their cultural heritage and their lives. Power within Southwest society continued to shift from Hispanic to Anglo control, and their writing contemplated this reality. The literary strategies they employed included a reclaiming of Hispanic identity, via the naming of cultural signs, such as Hispano topography and family names, emphasizing cultural resistance. They indicated nostalgia for the past, as owned by the community and not the individual, and

presented at the center, with the present as the margin. The literature itself is a mixing of various forms and genres, including

the oral and the written, history with creative autobiography, recipes and narrative, family history and romance. The mixing of genre...was seen by these writers as acceptable because it was a *recuerdo*, a remembering, and because all the narration was underscored by the *cuento* storytelling tradition. (Rebolledo and Rivero 18; their emphasis)

Many of the texts have a “highly feminine voice” and a ‘translation’ of Spanish into English, critiquing and ridiculing Anglo culture (Rebolledo and Rivero 18). These writers provide a history of women that was often not included in other accounts. They are concerned with the loss of language and land, and “empower a community discourse, a collective storytelling” (Rebolledo 47).

After Mexican Americans returned from World War II, they continued to question the social and political realities of the United States. In the 1960’s, a number of initiatives arose to organize Mexican Americans and protest and demand rights, culminating in the Chicano Movement. This campaign focused on several struggles nationally, including “farm workers’ rights, land tenure, educational reform, political representation, the war in Vietnam, and ‘police brutality’” (Escobar 1485). A component of this, the United Farmworkers (UFW) Movement, is particularly important for *Under the Feet of Jesus*, as the novel is told by a family who works as piscadores (grape pickers). During a lunch break on a 109 degree Fahrenheit day, a few workers distribute “white leaflets with black eagles on them,” which is the UFW’s logo (Viramontes 84). Estrella, a thirteen year old migrant worker, sticks a pamphlet in her pocket, thinking she will read it later, although we never learn her thoughts about it. Also, Viramontes

dedicated the novel to César Chávez, a co-leader and founder of the UFW, who passed away in 1993, two years prior to the publication of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, as well as her parents, who met while picking cotton.

The setting of the novel, and of much of the UFW's activity, is the San Joaquin Valley in California. Laura Pulido notes that growers "have historically been interested in recruiting an abundant, cheap, mobile, ethnically diverse, and temporary labor pool" (63). Mexicans, due to Mexico's proximity to California, aptly fit this description. Also, racist attitudes about Mexican and Mexican-American workers by white, male growers have been used to rationalize low pay and horrendous working conditions. By the 1920's, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were dominant in the labor force, although there were many Chinese-, Japanese-, Armenian-, Portuguese-, and Filipino-American workers as well. Due to the great amount of power granted corporate growers by the US government and the University of California (via research), labor organizers had little success in pushing for rights of workers. In 1942, the Bracero Program was enacted, which legally persisted until 1964, and allowed for temporary contract workers to enter the United States from Mexico, increasing the difficulty of unionization.

From 1962 to 1965 César Chávez (joined by co-leader Dolores Huerta in 1964) built the National Farm Worker Association (NFWA), which merged with the largely Filipino American Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in 1966 to create the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). These organizations and their struggles were controversial not only because of their desire to unionize, but also because they sought participation in

management, in an effort to reduce the great power imbalance between growers and workers (Pulido 71). Throughout the late 1960's, the UFW worked ceaselessly, participating in the five-year Delano Grape Strike, international grape boycotts, lettuce boycotts, and many other efforts. In 1972, "the UFW [was] chartered as an independent affiliate by the AFL-CIO; it [became] the United Farm Workers of America" (*United Farm Workers*).

Pesticides were (and are) a central issue for the UFW, and they occupy a central role in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Alejo is a fifteen year old who picks fruit during his summer vacation from school. He grows seriously ill after he is sprayed with pesticides while picking peaches in an orchard, and is near death when he is taken to the hospital by Estrella's family. While Estrella, who is thirteen years old, does not appear overly aware of the UFW, she is cognizant of the pesticides that are present in the fields and in the land near the fields, which is where the workers live: "Estrella had heard through the grapevine about the water, and knew Big Mac the Foreman lied about the pesticides not spilling into the ditch; but the water seemed clear and cool and irresistible on such a hot day" (Viramontes 32). These pesticides are a matter of life and death, encountered through a job that pays little and allows the most limited survival. The UFW's pesticide campaign gained momentum in the late 1960's and early 1970's with new wine grape and table grape contracts that contained a historic health and safety clause, in which the union's right to participate in pesticide regulation was recognized by growers (Pulido 115). However, while Pulido describes the UFW as "one of the most important forces for change to ever hit California agriculture"

(120), she also notes that despite the UFW's many accomplishments, it "was unable to achieve lasting changes in fieldwork" (121). She explains, "Due to the antilabor position adopted by both the state and federal governments, the increasing internationalization of the global economy, and the declining power of the UFW itself, field conditions today have regressed over the past twenty years" (Pulido 121). While the exact year of the novel is never stated, it certainly transpires during this period.

Burford references numerous studies which attest to the ongoing urgency of increased pesticide regulation. Despite guidelines created by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1994, pesticides continue to cause illness and death: a 1997 study by the EPA estimated that "every year approximately 300,000 farm workers suffer from illnesses as a result of pesticide poisoning, many of whom are children who are especially vulnerable" (Burford par. 3). Burford also notes that the number of diagnosed cases of pesticide exposure is undoubtedly lower than the actual volume of cases, due to farmworkers' limited access to and funds for health care. A 2004 article in *Cancer Weekly* calls for greater change, noting that the 1994 guidelines continue to fall short and that the health risk for workers and families is still high (Burford par. 3). Pesticides, and their effects, have not diminished with time, and Burford proposes transnational feminist alliances that confront pesticide use and the exploitation of farmworkers.

In *Their Dogs Came With Them*, Viramontes transitions to an urban location, where other battles were waged during the Chicano Movement. East

Los Angeles was a turbulent and important site for the movement, due to its large Mexican-American population, the influx of activity there, and the national publicity it received (Escobar 1491). The movement was fueled largely by young people, including high school and college students, who “believed that solely through militant, confrontational means could they force white institutions to redress their grievances” (Escobar 1491). There were several key organizations, including the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), the Brown Berets, the National Chicano Moratorium Committee, and La Raza Unida party. While Viramontes continues to return to aspects of the Chicano Movement in her writing, her characters are not movement participants. Edward J. Escobar describes three groups outside of the movement, one of which aptly describes the characters in Viramontes’s novel: “the overwhelming majority of Mexican Americans who struggled for day-to-day survival and who therefore had little time or energy for political activity” (Escobar 1491). Still, aspects of the movement arise within the story, as they transpire around its characters. Ermila, Lollie, Mousie, and Rini participate in initial activities at their high school, and are disappointed that the student walkout isn’t possible, due to the weather. In March 1968, “over ten thousand East Los Angeles Chicano high school students walked out of their classes to protest the inferior education they received” (Escobar 1495). However, these young women attend only one meeting, participate in just a few activities, and are ultimately detached. Ben, a college student during this time, “refuse[s] to be clearly defined as a Chicano, and for that, he refuse[s] to belong to a fluid movement” (Viramontes 118). He is told that if he isn’t part of the

solution, he is part of the problem (Viramontes 118). He has an encounter with a Chicana who is a member of MEChA, as well as the Brown Berets, an organization similar to the Black Panthers, and she gives him her beret. Ben wears this beret, not for political reasons, but because his interaction with this Chicana is his first with a young woman, and he is touched by her kindness and the familiar way she brushes his scars, with curiosity. Turtle, a homeless young adult, spots Ben outfitted in his brown beret at a bus stop, and decides he is a Che Guevara wannabe (and in her opinion, a loser), insinuating that he does not fit the mold of a revolutionary, with his pimply face, small stature, and thick book. These characters are surrounded by the movement, but do not engage with it. Viramontes continues to return to characters that demonstrate the intersections of gender, race, and class, and due to the multiple systems of oppression that complicate their lives, they are not able to participate; they must focus on their daily acts of resistance, and simply living.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) went to great lengths to destroy the movement, including force and intimidation, infiltrating Chicano organizations to gain information and divide and dismantle them, and labeling Chicano organizations as Communist and terrorist groups to discredit them (Escobar 1485). In the novel, the Quarantine Authority is reminiscent of the intimidation and surveillance employed by the LAPD. Hsuan L. Hsu explains that “this fictional public health quarantine loosely parallels the actual ‘public safety’ curfews imposed during the Chicano Moratorium of 1969–71” (155). Under the pretext of rabies prevention, the QA enforces a curfew in the Eastside, insisting

that residents must remain in their homes from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. Ermila and her friends aptly suspect that this charade is merely an excuse to torture residents and inspect documentation. The police of the novel are ubiquitous, and the neighborhood's residents cannot escape them. Escobar argues, however, that during the Chicano Movement the LAPD's efforts were partly unsuccessful, as they "invigorated" and "helped politicize and empower the Mexican-American community," when Chicanos used "the issues of political harassment and police brutality to increase participation in their movement" (1488).

The Chicana/Chicano Renaissance began in the late 1960's, in tandem with these social and political movements, and resulted in an abundance of artistic and literary creativity. The publication of Chicana texts occurred later than Chicano texts, in the mid 1970's and 1980's, and "early writing by many Chicanas emphasized their sense of being marginalized by the Chicanos themselves, their sense of being left behind" (Rebolledo and Rivero 22). During the 1980's, "Chicanas...wrote *Bildungs* texts, explored the social and the political, looked for role models in their literary heritage, fought back at what they saw as an oppressive dominant society, and came together as a consciously awakened group of women" (Rebolledo and Rivero 24). Rebolledo and Rivero identify trends in Chicana literature of the early 1990's, including the growth of the personal essay, the inclusion of male characters and relationships in Chicana writing, an openness to engaging with sexuality, and a continued interest in and more precisely articulated thoughts about borders (25-33). Viramontes's texts reflect these trends, particularly as they introduce a diverse array of male



characters and varying conceptions of masculinity. They also engage with transnational feminist theory and themes, including the multiplicity and unreliability of home; the invisibility and hypervisibility of women, workers, and youth; and the daily acts of resistance by women.

CHAPTER I  
THE MULTIPLICITY AND UNRELIABILITY OF HOME

Home is a topic of conversation within transnational feminism, as the experiences of diasporic and migrant populations challenge the notion of home. Bhattacharjee questions the meaning of home in her work with the South Asian community in the United States. She presents three manifestations of home for South Asian immigrants: “the (conventional) domestic sphere of the heterosexual and patriarchal family,” the extended ethnic community, and the nation of origin (341). This multiplicity of homes is not unique to this immigrant group, and it resonates with the homes in Viramontes’s texts. In her stories, home is unstable, a site that Viramontes’s characters cannot rely on.

Early in her career, Viramontes inserted these multiple homes into her stories. In “Growing,” Bhattacharjee’s three homes are present. The conventional, patriarchal home is governed by Naomi’s father, and while he is barely present in the story, he exercises a strong reign over Naomi’s life. He restricts Naomi’s interactions outside the home, and insinuates that she cannot be trusted as she enters womanhood. The nation of origin is not specified, although it is referenced, as Naomi insists the United States is different from it when she protests the necessity of her little sister, Lucía, as her chaperone; it is a Spanish-speaking country, and likely Mexico. These homes are mentioned briefly, but they are significant, for their impact on Naomi as an individual and an adolescent.

The extended ethnic community and neighborhood (East Los Angeles) that Naomi and Lucía traverse is described in greater detail as a space. This home is disrupted by freeways, a topic Viramontes returns to in *Their Dogs Came With Them*. However, it is also filled with childhood, something that migrant homes cannot afford, as children begin working at a young age. A stickball game involves fifteen kids, and a few adults watch nearby. These children are described endearingly, as eager and active, with their hand-me-down clothes and carefree lives. This game, and this home, aid in exploring Naomi's transition from childhood to adolescence, as she watches the game from the sidelines and debates if she is a spectator (an adolescent) or a player (a child). The homes in this story are less unreliable than those in Viramontes's other stories, but are sites of confusion and transformation for Naomi, nevertheless.

Viramontes also considers migrant homes in her writing. In "The Jumping Bean," the family's home is temporary and transitory. They initially live in East Los Angeles, but this family will need "to move to where the migrant work [is] guaranteed: tomatoes in Indiana, asparagus in Illinois, strawberries in Michigan" (Viramontes 129). Toward the end of the story, they prepare to leave. However, other homes, including the extended ethnic community and nation of origin, are largely absent in this text. Still, the home that is present is an uncomfortable one for María de la Luz, one of the story's central characters, as she cares for her family due to her mother's illness, and resists her father's patriarchal control. This urban home differs from Naomi's, as it is an impermanent home.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, home is a more complicated and contemplated notion. Like in “The Jumping Bean,” the location of the family’s physical home is always changing. After Estrella, one of the novel’s central teenage characters, and Maxine, Estrella’s short lived friend, fight, Estrella’s family departs: “and as they always did, sooner this time than later, they would leave...” (Viramontes 37). It is an impermanent home, which must be dismantled and then recreated with every move. This routine is outlined very precisely in the novel, involving all of the family’s members, as they gather their belongings and load the car. When the family reaches its new home, Perfecto Flores, Estrella’s surrogate father, inspects the bungalow the family inhabits, plugging holes to discourage mice and hanging the sky-blue blanket that will divide the house into two rooms. Petra, Estrella’s mother, assembles her altar in one corner of the bungalow, which includes statues of Jesucristo, La Virgen María, and José. Estrella draws a line in the dirt around the bungalow, creating a great circle, which Petra believes the scorpions will not penetrate. Later in the novel, Ricky, Estrella’s younger brother, suggests to his mother, “Maybe we can stay in one place...” (Viramontes 154). This movement is difficult for everyone, including the children, who never know how long they will remain in one location.

Home as the extended ethnic community is evident in the novel through Alejo, a teenage migrant worker. Alejo is far from his home with his grandmother, and when he falls ill, Petra cares for him. She reasons, ‘Maybe we should bring him here...If we don’t take care of each other, who would take care of us?...We have to look out for our own’ (Viramontes 96). Alejo stays in Petra’s home during

this time, and the family goes to great lengths to eventually take Alejo to a clinic and then a hospital. Yet, as these characters struggle to survive, the extended community cannot always be counted on. The Devridges, a family of migrant workers, do not belong to the same extended ethnic community as Estrella's family, but are part of the extended migrant community, and work side by side with Estrella and her family in the fields. However, due to Maxine Devridge and Estrella's conflict, Estrella's family must move:

When Perfecto returned with the mother, Estrella would have to tell her about the fight and the mother would sit outside the tarpaulin tent with aching varicose veins and wait for Big Mac to drive up and tell them to move on for their own good on account of he wasn't responsible for harm or bodily affliction caused by the devil-sucking vengeful Devridges. Migrant families are tight, he would say, you ought to know. They look out for their own. (Viramontes 36)

The Devridges are notoriously difficult, and any grudges may not be easily resolved. Estrella recognizes the stress of moving, and the hardship of yet another task, as she imagines Petra's veins and alludes to the shame she feels for causing their next relocation. This event forces Estrella's family to move their physical home; they cannot always rely on the extended community as another home.

The third home, home as the nation of origin, is present in Perfecto, as he remembers his previous, more permanent home, "his real home," and he desires to return there (Viramontes 78):

What would happen if he forgot his way home?...The desire to return home was now a tumor lodged under the muscle of Perfecto's heart and getting larger with every passing day...The money was essential to get home before home became so distant, he wouldn't be able to remember his way back. (Viramontes 79; 82-83)

In this passage Perfecto viscerally feels this need, and acknowledges the financial resources that are necessary to leave, and are always in short supply. As he grows older, the importance of this home increases, and he begins to feel that death will arrive before he is able to reach home. As he coughs, “dying insects lay on the soil everywhere” (Viramontes 81). Maggots burrow out of the earth he stands on, and he has a premonition that God will reach through the clouds and whisk him away to the heavens, as his chest aches. He dreams of illness,

his veins like irrigation canals clogged with dying insects, twitching on their backs, their little twig legs jerking... There was no denying the insect signs that warned him... The final sign was the young man Alejo. He could feel the boy's death under his bare feet as he carried him up the porch and into their house. It was that close. (Viramontes 100; 101)

Perfecto senses death creeping toward him. Death surrounds him, from these insects to Alejo's illness and the environment, filled with pesticides. His urgency to return home crescendos throughout the novel, and we last see him grappling with this decision—to leave or to stay.

Generally, this multiplicity of homes provokes a questioning of home, and sometimes a sense of ambiguity towards home. As the workers stand in the field, they listen to a passing train: “The lone train broke the sun and silence with its growing thunderous roar and the train reminded the piscadores of destinations, of arrivals and departures, of home and not of home. For they did stop and listen” (Viramontes 55). The workers are reminded of home, yet they may not be certain where home is anymore, or which home they are reflecting on. Later, Estrella

watches a baseball game, and as the lights at the baseball diamond blind her, she has a moment of panic:

The border patrol, she thought, and she tried to remember which side she was on and which side of the wire mesh she was safe in. The floodlights aimed at the phantoms in the field. Or were the lights directed at her? Could the spectators see her from where she stood? Where was home? (Viramontes 59-60)

The uncertainty of home and the border hit Estrella as she realizes she doesn't know exactly where she is, where she is safe, and where home is. Viramontes very purposefully selects baseball as the game that Estrella watches, drawing on its strong association with the United States. This moment, therefore, provokes other questions as well: Is Estrella a player or a spectator in this nation? Who is a citizen? What does it mean to be a citizen? Do race and class supplant citizenship? Estrella was born in the United States, but she still feels the pressure of La Migra, and is most aligned with the migrant worker community, regardless of citizenship. Viramontes seems to suggest an alternative to citizenship, a new consciousness that binds workers, regardless of their nationality and the location of their homes.

Viramontes's second novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them*, continues to address the notion of home. This novel is set in East Los Angeles, or "the Eastside," as are "Growing" and "The Jumping Bean," where the freeway encroaches on a neighborhood and homes. In the first chapter, Chavela, a neighbor who several of the characters later recall, introduces the inevitable displacement of home: "Pay attention, Chavela demanded. Because displacement will always come down to two things: earthquakes or earthmovers"

(Viramontes 8). The “earthmovers” are making way for the freeway, pulverizing homes on one side of First Street. The four-freeway interchange will reroute 547,300 cars a day, making it the busiest in the city (Viramontes 169). While this project may benefit commuters, it has little to no benefit for this neighborhood, and is rather a case of environmental racism, as the Eastside is sacrificed for the convenience of other Los Angeles residents. This construction is disruptive on many levels, as it produces noise and air pollution. The neighborhood’s memory is erased, and the characters of the novel reflect on this aspect of the construction: “She realized the construction of the freeway was ridding the neighborhood of everything that was familiar to her. The memory of who lived where, who buried their children’s umbilical cords or grew lemons the size of apples, done away” (Viramontes 146). When Tranquilina, a central character in the novel, and her mother return to the neighborhood years later, her mother similarly recalls how things used to be, when “neighbors of different nationalities intersected with one another” (Viramontes 32). The Eastside has been isolated by this project. The freeways have a physical, psychological, and sociological impact on the neighborhood, as they demolish everything in their path.

Viramontes presents another discomfort in the Eastside, the Quarantine Authority (QA), as a parallel event to the construction of the freeways; history repeats itself, as the Eastside is again targeted by the city, this time in relation to public health. Helicopters, sharpshooters, and searchlights produce noise, light, and vibrations throughout the night, as “mammals,” including, at times, humans, are shot, and gunfire echoes throughout the neighborhood. The QA sets up



roadblocks and checkpoints each evening, which residents must pass through if they are arriving home after the curfew begins. Residents stand in line for long periods of time, reassuring their children, enduring harassment, and proving they reside in the area. This questioning resonates with *Under the Feet of Jesus*, as residents are assumed to not actually live in the Eastside, and are policed based on race and class, as the implication that they are not citizens of the United States, and/or possess the rights of full citizenship, hovers, unsaid. Viramontes touches on the different conceptions of citizenship in this neighborhood, as residents put little faith in the flimsy pieces of paper that the city recognizes. Legal status shifts with the different perspectives on who the border truly belongs to.

In this novel Viramontes also describes the interactions between the Eastside's residents, structures, and environment. The characters of the novel see themselves in this neighborhood; their faces are reflected in its surfaces. Turtle, a homeless, transgender young adult, catches "sight of her prismatic reflections in the black monitors of the display televisions" (Viramontes 21). Ermila Zumaya, a fifteen year old student, examines herself in a bus window, noting her vibrant sweater and dark, straight hair. During the freeway construction, the McBride Boys, a local gang, literally etch themselves into the neighborhood's structures, as they vandalize the wet concrete. Nature creeps within the Eastside, with force. A storm brings sheets of rain, and the water "percolate[s] into puddles, glutting the gutter grates...the streets course into navigable rivers" (Viramontes 33; 49). This urban neighborhood cannot

completely separate itself from nature. There is an interconnectedness of nature, the neighborhood's structures, and the people who roam through the Eastside; these different forces grate on each other over time.

Like the Eastside, the family home is disrupted by the freeways, but it is also challenged by abuse and the effects of the Vietnam War. The homes on the "living side" of First Street, the homes which survived the construction, have varying success. Turtle's home is described in terms of its members, and how the home and Turtle's mother and father have deteriorated:

The walls had absorbed so many years of disappointments, bad plumbing, strife, arguments, electrical shorts and temper outages that the wallpaper became unglued, the tiles fell from their grouting, the toilet chain in the water tank busted. Amá was part of the house, carelessly repaired with cardboard and duct tape like her cracked windows. Frank was part of the house, a loose, exposed wire ready to electrocute anyone who touched him. (Viramontes 161-162)

Turtle's parents seep into this house, and are as broken as their home. Frank beats Amá vigorously, and it shows; Frank's temper is unpredictable and volatile. When this home fails, its children seek another home in a gang, and eventually Luis, Turtle's brother, is drafted into the Vietnam War. Luis and other adolescents like him, impacted by homes like this one and the war, have an uncertain future. However, these young men and women do have memories of a happier time, a childhood, before: "and before the male children were old enough to be drafted into the Vietnam War, and before the female children became widows and single parents or caretakers of their husbands' maimed souls, they were carefree children..." (160). Many of the Eastside's men die in the war, including Gilbert Durán, a Marine who lived on Ben's street, and YoYo, Mousie's brother. The

family home isn't a refuge for the novel's young characters, and it is unclear what kind of homes they will create, or who will fill their homes, as their loved ones perish.

The nation of origin is present in this text as well, particularly through two characters: Obdulio and Nacho. Like Perfecto, Obdulio, a butcher at El Zócalo Fine Meats, wishes to return home: "All Obdulio wanted to do was go home, not here, to his temporary and exiled life in the Eastside, but to the house in Jerez, Zacatecas...To go home now...This minute. Tonight" (Viramontes 141).

Obdulio's home in the Eastside is sparse, as he sends all of his money to his family in Mexico, which is also his reason for not departing sooner. We learn, though, that eventually Obdulio does embark on his journey home. Nacho, a sort-of cousin of Ermila, also wishes to return home, to Reynosa, Mexico; tragically, he is murdered at the bus depot with his return ticket in hand. Returning home is a difficulty for these characters, and an impossibility for Nacho.

Viramontes also explores homelessness in this novel, as two of the primary characters later have no physical home to return to, and live on the streets of the home that is the Eastside. Turtle plods through the city, searching for a place to sleep, avoiding the McBride Boys (due to her AWOL status within the gang, as she is a member) and their rival gang (Lote Maravilla), scrounging food to diminish her "yellow-eyed hunger" (Viramontes 32). This urban landscape has hidden markings, which Turtle can see, and they impinge on her survival: "Turtle considered the double risk of walking down the eight gang-disputed blocks to get to the market and then making a fast food break with some oranges

or pears” (Viramontes 19). Other everyday challenges present themselves, such as when Ray, the owner of the Friendly Shop, offers her the opportunity to work a shift the next morning at 7 a.m., and she therefore must stay up all night, with no alarm clock to wake her. Like the migrant workers in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Turtle’s life is filled with uncertainties. However, Turtle does not identify with migrant workers, despite any similarities in their lives:

A few Mexican laborers gathered on the steps of the Sacred Heart Church searching eagerly for possible employment. By their thrift-shop looks, their desperate pleading faces, Turtle knew they were migratory and their faces elicited contempt in her. Turtle became embarrassed for them, their low-casting eyes, their soiled shirts and dirty hands, their *begging* for a job. What losers. (Viramontes 18)

On several occasions other characters inform Turtle that she smells, needs a shower, and her clothes are described as falling off her. She also has no job, and no home. She is isolated, with no one to turn to, and therefore, her situation is perhaps worse than these migrant laborers. However, she rejects any solidarity with these workers, due to her pride and a code she has internalized, although it may not be a rational one.

The novel references multiple battles, several of which Turtle must navigate; one of these is directly related to her lack of a home, and is waged due to capitalism:

At sundown, war was declared between the haves who abandoned their office buildings for home, and have-nots who pushed their portable cardboard homes in shopping carts to reclaim a place in the streets denied them during daylight. Dogs emerged, packs of them gathering in number as they roamed the streets to scavenge, to challenge the have-nots. (Viramontes 124)

Viramontes reflects on how the homeless have-nots, like Turtle, are permitted no space in this urban environment, or “home,” and are forced to fight off stray animals in the night. These people are invisible to the haves, and in several instances, Turtle hopes to remain this way, due to her vulnerability to violence and lack of protection. Turtle recites survival strategies from her brother Luis’s U.S. Army Field Manual, and her experience is therefore linked to his experience in Vietnam, as they both endure their respective wars. Turtle dodges gangs and police without a home to return to in the Eastside.

Another battle is waged by the QA against the Eastside. An epigraph in *Their Dogs Came With Them* describes the collaboration of the conquistadors and their dogs, as they raced forward into battle in Mexico. In the more contemporary setting of the novel, the QA uses rabid dogs as an excuse to vigorously police the Eastside. Throughout the text and in the various homes, dogs are presented as dead carcasses, packs that trample over cars stalled in traffic jams, and as a mysterious predator in Ermila’s bedroom. At the end of the novel, Tranquilina screams “*We’rrrrre not doggggs!*” as the sharpshooters hover nearby (Viramontes 324). They cannot distinguish the perpetrators from the victims, but they shoot without hesitancy. These residents are not safe in their neighborhood and homes, especially not from the police.

None of these homes, then, provide a reliable and secure space for their residents. The homes of migrant workers are temporary and transitory, as they constantly shift from one location to the next, and are created out of whatever materials or structures are available. Urban homes are threatened by internal

and external forces, including patriarchal figures, nature, and environmental racism. The extended ethnic community is under attack, due to the exploitation of workers and police brutality. Some characters wish to return to a more distant home, the nation of origin, but reaching this home is often difficult. Other characters reside in their nation of origin, the United States, but this home does not pause to recognize citizenship, only acknowledging race and class, as these characters are policed and a lack of citizenship is assumed. Citizenship, therefore, becomes painful and unreliable as well. Home is unstable, a space that the characters in many of Viramontes's texts cannot count on.

## CHAPTER II

## MASCULINITY IN THE WRITING OF HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES

The many homes of Viramontes's texts are heavily influenced by their male residents. Rebolledo and Rivero identify several trends in Chicana literature in the late 1980's and early 1990's, including "the redemption of the male relationships in the lives of Chicanas" (27). Previously, female maternal figures, such as the mother and grandmother, were the most prominent, and male figures were often present as negative, violent characters, or completely absent. This redemption occurs a bit later in Viramontes's texts, in the mid-1990's and beyond, as her male characters and their relationships evolve. The controlling, patriarchal father does not disappear, but in later texts Viramontes begins to explore kind, feminist male characters, who, like the young women in their lives, begin to recognize the rigid gender roles forced on young women and men, and the limited future paths for women. They are not activists, but they are hopeful characters, who embrace the multiplicity of masculinity.

In "Growing," there is a strong patriarchal presence, and Naomi recognizes the oppressive acts of the men around her. Naomi's nameless father dominates the text, despite his minimal appearance in the story. He orders Naomi to take her chaperone, Lucía, with her, because she is now a woman. Saldívar-Hull argues that Viramontes

does not allow us to assume that his privilege as patriarch is purely a Latino prerogative. When he thunders, 'TÚ ERES MUJER' (You are a woman) in his effort to control his daughter, the author links his voice with that of the deity, to all men whose male rules transcend borders, classes, and cultures. (142)

The capitalization of Naomi's father's words, and their resounding effect in the story, suggest they are linked to a higher power. This exclamation, then, encourages solidarity among women, as they recognize and resist patriarchal control. While Naomi's father is a domineering figure, Viramontes uses his words to unite her readers.

Older men are not the only ones to perceive the changes in Naomi, or to treat her differently as she exits childhood. Eloy, like Naomi's father, begins to limit Naomi and her interactions, as a physical relationship develops between Eloy and Naomi, and these gestures alter how Naomi behaves:

When...her body began to bleed at twelve, Eloy saw her in a different light. Under the house, he sucked her swelling nipples and became jealous when she spoke to other boys. He no longer wanted to throw rocks at the cars on the freeway with her, and she began to act differently because everyone began treating her differently and wasn't it crazy? She could no longer be herself, and her father could no longer trust her because she was a woman. (Viramontes 313-314)

Naomi recognizes the shift in Eloy, as well as the implication by her father that women are not to be trusted. While she may not know exactly what to do with this recognition yet, she is aware of the oppression that lurks around her.

The father in "The Jumping Bean" also exerts patriarchal control over his children. María's papa, who is nameless, is a hard worker. The toll that physical labor takes on his body results in whiskey and meanness, which is directed at his children: "he slapped her [María] for saying a bad word...the children cried, judged him with accusatory eyes and he began yelling at them, calling them beggars and leeches and told them to hide or he would kill them all..."



(Viramontes 129). It is noted that he would never leave this family, but this comes with a price: “he reminded her [María’s] mother constantly of his contributions and all of them were made to feel indebted to his relentless back and the two hands he rinsed with vinegar daily to relieve the burn of the abrasive, gray grit powder” (Viramontes 122). María’s father must emphasize his contribution to the family, but doesn’t appear to recognize anyone else’s, particularly María’s.

However, Viramontes describes this man with some empathy, as we are presented with his point of view. He is a fisherman, and he misses the sea, as he now spends his time amidst concrete and construction. He is a man who performs grueling work, to feed his family. He is resented by his co-workers, as in comparison to him they appear lazy; therefore, they refuse to respect him, and derogatorily call him a ‘spic’ (Viramontes 124-126). He later acknowledges that perhaps he was not always so hard, as he perceives the reaction of his children to him when he returns home at night, and considers the jokes his co-workers tell about him:

It made him wonder about his wife who believed demons possessed her, about his sons who stayed out half the night, the children who scattered in fear, and his beautiful daughter María whom he had slapped with all his might, made him wonder if he was the one being possessed by these jokes he did not find funny. (Viramontes 129)

This father does not understand the actions of his family members, as he cannot relate to his wife or his children. Yet, he also wonders about himself, and if the circumstances of his life have changed him. He is uncertain, and while his wife is ill, he flounders.

These fathers in “Growing” and “The Jumping Bean” are nameless, transnational characters, who speak Spanish but are allowed little dialogue in the text. While they don’t require dialogue to exercise their power in the home, they are still denied a voice and a name. Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba consider language use and silence within Viramontes’s stories, identifying what they term a “muted bilingualism” (164). “Growing” and “The Jumping Bean” are mainly written in English, with little Spanish, although these fathers speak it. This absence of voice allows their daughters, Naomi and María, to emerge from the text as the prominent voices, contributing to Naomi’s recognition of her situation and María’s transformation.

The male characters in *Under the Feet of Jesus* differ substantially from these earlier fathers, and from Eloy, Naomi’s romantic interest. Alejo provides Estrella with moments of joy, a rarity for her in the novel; Sandoval also reads Alejo and Estrella’s relationship as a sexual awakening for Estrella. In a later scene, Estrella and Alejo lie under a truck for shade during a break at the fields. Alejo holds Estrella’s hand, and then kisses it. Estrella abandons herself in this moment, releasing the guardedness she always maintains. Alejo allows Estrella to be a teenager, as she suspends everything else, if only for a moment. These moments provide Estrella with hope, for love and life, which she will carry with her into her future.

Estrella’s biological father is absent from her life, but Perfecto fills this paternal role. These male characters are transnational ones, as both have worked and lived in the United States (and in Estrella’s father’s case—married),

and both have a tie to Mexico: Estrella's father travels to Jerez, Zacatecas, and may have relocated to Mexico, while Perfecto wishes to return there. Petra wonders how Estrella's father "had the nerve to disappear as if his life belonged to no one but him?" (Viramontes 17). Yet, Petra later implies that Estrella has inherited this will of her father's: "There was no stopping Estrella...no holding back the will of her body. How many times had her own [Petra's] mother warned her, pleaded with her not to get involved with a man like Estrella's real father?" (Viramontes 163-164). Additionally, Estrella's father selected her name, and the green specks in Estrella's eyes are thought to originate from him. Estrella is her father's daughter, although she is also a combination of her mother and the country she was born in, the United States.

Perfecto, though, is even more influential in Estrella's life than her father, as a role model and a teacher. Sandoval provides a feminist reading of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, in which she explores Perfecto's relationship with Estrella.

Sandoval argues that Perfecto and his tools are Estrella's inspiration to read and to learn, as she realizes the value of words and tools. This, coupled with her relationship with Alejo, allow her to empower herself, and reach adulthood.

Sandoval writes,

By the novel's end, Estrella has come full circle. While she stands on the barn's roof, she has a bird's eye view of her world. She has found her voice of resistance. She has become a hope for future generations...It is at that point, on the roof of the barn, that she reaches maturity. As a result of these experiences, Estrella's acts of daily resistance will continue to guide her life. Her struggles and actions will counter the expectations of mainstream society. (87-88)

These male characters, then, significantly contribute to Estrella's development, and influence her future. Estrella is a symbol of hope, and will rupture the cycles of poverty and exploitation that have restricted her family for several generations. She will use the tools and words Perfecto has given her to fight mainstream society from one day to the next.

*Their Dogs Came With Them* presents an explosion of male characters, some of which resonate with Perfecto and Alejo, and others that more closely resemble the nameless fathers (and worse). In the novel, there is an array of physically and emotionally abusive fathers and male figures: Horseback, the owner of Rancho Paradiso, thrives while indentured servants are trapped in his clutches and he plans to retain (steal) their children; Ben's father refuses to console his children after their mother's disappearance and death, and instead spouts his army inspired slogans, "make do or die" and "sink-or-swim" (Viramontes 106; 99); Turtle's father, Frank, beats his children and his wife; Lucho's father, a once semiprofessional wrestler, dangles Lucho from an overpass as a child, producing his stutter, which persists for life; Jan, Rini's mother's boyfriend, sexually harasses and potentially abuses Rini; and a rancher's son-in-law attacks and rapes Tranquilina. These men are cruel and unredeemable characters who exhibit a violent masculinity that has lasting effects on those around them.

Several of the children of these men join a gang, as an alternative home and family, including Turtle, Luis, and Lucho. The McBride Boys have a precise definition of masculinity that they subscribe to. This involves cars, never getting

caught, never retreating from a challenge, and several other “rules” or codes of behavior:

Hanging with the McBride Boys, Luis was learning how not to talk...the confident badass walk...the khakis and Pendleton uniform por vida, the spit-shine wingtips polished, the haircut readied for battle; the one-of-a-kind McBride handshake...It was all about unquestioned loyalty that only familia could understand.  
(Viramontes 158)

These rules are ones that the McBride Boys live by, although they all suggest that they don't “make the rules,” as if they originate from a divine, unknown source (Viramontes 22). This gang does allow a transgender member, with some reluctance, when Luis brings Turtle to their meeting spot and she is beaten to a pulp as her initiation. Although Turtle works twice as hard as the others to assert her masculinity, she will always be “the only McBride Boy lacking, as in **S** for *Sin huevos*” (without balls) (Viramontes 229; her emphasis). In murdering Nacho, she again asserts her masculinity, but is taken advantage of by Alfonso, a leader of the McBride Boys, as he exploits her desire to be perceived as masculine, pushing her into this act. At the scene of the murder, Turtle is still reeling from smoking a marijuana joint laced with PCP, and Alfonso encourages her to finish Nacho off, with her screwdriver. He wishes Nacho dead, because Nacho locked him in a lifeguard booth at the beach. Afterwards, the McBride Boys abandon Turtle to fend for herself. For this gang, biological sex is a critical component of masculinity, and is nonnegotiable.

Turtle, or Antonia María Gamboa, is a character that extends masculinity significantly onto and into a female body. Turtle identifies as a man, although she was born a woman. Her sexuality is never discussed in the novel, and so as a

character she is most concerned with gender, as she negotiates a sex and a gender that, according to mainstream society, are not congruent. Viramontes continues to use the pronoun “her” throughout the novel, reinforcing the duality of Turtle; I will also refer to Turtle in this way. The characters in the novel address Turtle varyingly: Luis refers to her as *ése*, a masculine pronoun, whereas Santos refers to her as *ésa*, a feminine pronoun. “Turtle” is her gang initiated name, which is a feminine word in Spanish, again underscoring her masculine exterior and her female body. When Turtle catches her reflection, she notes that “the studs stapled on the curves of her ears at first to disguise the Turtle in her but later to disguise the Antonia in him no longer had that glint of steel” (Viramontes 21). Here we see the shift in Turtle’s identity, as well as the suggestion that Turtle must always hide a piece of herself. She literally hides throughout the Eastside, from multiple gangs and the police. Luis largely supports his sister, even if he resents her as he matures. He shaves Turtle’s head, adding to her “choice of boxers under her cutoffs...her erasure of breasts and dresses and all that was outwardly female” (Viramontes 25). When Turtle grows older, and is homeless, those that she encounters recognize her as a man, and Ray, the owner of the Friendly Shop, visits the police station after Turtle’s death, correcting the police report, insisting that Turtle was a “he” and not a “she,” an “Antonio” and not an “Antonia” (Viramontes 258). Tranquilina also refers to Turtle as a boy on the novel’s last page. Toward the end of the novel, Turtle suggests that Antonia has ceased to exist, that this segment of her life has disappeared when Tranquilina asks her why she murdered Nacho: “because a tall girl named Antonia never

existed, because her history held no memory” (Viramontes 324). Turtle has lost contact with her family, and like the Eastside, her life has been reconfigured. Antonia, and her past, have vanished completely from Turtle. In killing Nacho, Turtle also kills Antonia, and reasserts her masculinity.

Viramontes briefly considers the intersection of masculinity and sexuality in this novel as well. Heterosexuality is the assumed masculine sexual orientation by the novel’s characters for men. In this tradition, male run businesses, such as El Zócalo Fine Meats and Salas Used Cars, prominently display the El Zócalo Fine Meats calendar, which includes “semi-nude, egg-yolk-blond models” on its pages (Viramontes 64). Additionally, derogatory terms referencing homosexuality are employed constantly by the gang members, and others, in their conversations. Toward the end of the novel, Alfonso, a leader of the McBride Boys, and Lucho, a gang member, complicate this assumed heterosexuality. Alfonso tells himself that the blowjobs he gives Lucho do not mean he is gay or bisexual, as he has sex with his girlfriend, Ermila, which, to him, proves he is heterosexual, and only heterosexual. Additionally, Alfonso challenges Lucho’s masculinity when a few of the McBride Boys are gathered at Alfonso’s home, and Lucho, out of love and his desire to cry rather than fight, walks away. Alfonso overcompensates in his quest to display his masculinity, as it is inconceivable to him (and everyone around him) that one can be masculine and queer. Hence, he does not speak, or even think, of his sexuality, privileging his masculinity.

With age, the masculinity that curses so strongly through the younger characters’ veins dissipates. After Ermila’s grandfather has a stroke, his family

begins to ignore him, and he can no longer irk these characters as he used to. When Ermila is young, he doesn't wish to regain custody of her from the court after her parents have disappeared. He tells Grandmother to "hide her; hider her so that I won't have to see her!" (Viramontes 70). While both Grandmother and Grandfather grapple with their granddaughter's presence, as they see her mother in her, Grandfather is particularly mean; he has little tolerance for what he deems any misbehavior: "his rough hand...had the capacity to catapult against the side of her face whenever she wasn't a good girl" (Viramontes 14). He also threatens Ermila that she may be abducted like Renata Valenzuela if she is bad. Renata is *the* cautionary tale, and Grandfather uses this disappearance, taunting Ermila as he says "Renata will get you!" (Viramontes 8). Renata is transformed into a ghost that will punish Ermila if she doesn't obey her grandfather, his attempt to regulate female behavior. After the stroke, he stands in the kitchen amidst Grandmother, Ermila, and Nacho, and no one heeds his screeching over the broken glass. He has lost some of his power, due to his advancing age and stroke. Ermila and Grandmother, on the other hand, have gained power. Ermila has grown older, and is beginning to resist the men around her. Grandmother has tired of Grandfather's antics, and recognizes his weakened state. Grandfather is no longer the patriarchal force he once was.

Two of the younger, male characters—Ben and Nacho—are more hopeful ones, as they have similar realizations as the young women in the novel and think feminist thoughts. An eleven-year-old Ben reflects on the future of his sister, Ana, as well as his own, noting the paths that are already in place. Ben's father



has purchased *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, *Roget's Thesaurus*, *Gray's Anatomy*, and a desk for Ben, while he has acquired a typewriter and flats for his daughter. Ben is destined to become a professional and elevate the family, while Ana is to simply get by, with a dead end job. Although he is young, Ben can already see his father's scheming, and senses the unfairness of this assumption.

Ben's observations are similar to Ermila's, who perceives the limited options for women as she observes those around her. She describes the women she sees outside her window each morning waiting for the bus, as they prepare to travel to jobs as nannies, housekeepers, garment workers, hotel maids, and nurses' aides. Not only are these occupations challenging, but the commutes to them are long. While these women do what they must, the sight of them tires Ermila. She thinks to herself, "We're fucked" (Viramontes 176). Later she further questions the options that surround her: "Lollie's mother slowly filled up with the fatty tires of family responsibility while Concha emptied because of family abandonment and Ermila had thought, What kind of fucked-up options are these?" (Viramontes 193). Concha is a legend, her life a warning to young women, as she fell from "successful restaurateur to illegal beautician" (Viramontes 185). Ben and Ermila perceive the narrow choices for women, which appear to only involve physically draining and administrative jobs, motherhood, and failure.

As an adult, Ben also recognizes the unfairness of how his mother was treated, and then pushes this realization one step further, as he imagines and writes about a nameless street woman, paralleling her possible experience to his

mother's. Ben's mother disappeared, and before her body was discovered, Ben's father deemed her a slut, assuming she willfully ran away with another man. Ben recalls his mother's interactions with store clerks, when she was short on money, and they threatened to call the police, as well as God's general inability to watch over her. He thinks, "Like God, they all remained unkind and undeserving of her" (Viramontes 106). When he encounters the street woman at a church service, he tells Tranquilina that "she could be anyone's mother" (Viramontes 88). Ben sees this woman and wonders about more than her raggedy clothes. When he returns home, he decides to write a story of this woman, or a woman like her, and like Viramontes, he writes to give invisible women visibility. He writes about a transnational woman, who traveled from Mexico to the United States, and like his mother, married an Anglo soldier. She gave her son a pair of Converse sneakers, like the sneakers Ben wore when he was eleven. Ben acknowledges that to know this woman, and others like her, one must look deeper, for "it was one thing to assume, another to conjure, and yet another *to feel for her*" (Viramontes 125; her emphasis). This woman could be anyone's mother, she could be Ben's, and Ben writes a story that imagines a possible voice.

Nacho is a male character who also recognizes gender roles, and traverses gender boundaries. When he assists in removing the laundry from the clothesline and folding it, his grandfather has a visceral reaction:

He noticed Grandfather's displeasure. Nacho's committed efforts to fold dish towels with imprecise angles made his old, grumpy Grandfather wheeze displeasure through his nasal passages with loud, noisy breaths. Is this what men have been reduced to? his milky stare seemed to ask. The sight of a healthy young man spreading a shirt with buttons facedown on the table and then

handcuffing the long sleeves and then confining them behind some bad folds was too much to bear for Grandfather... (Viramontes 239-240)

Nacho is confident, and doesn't heed his grandfather's disapproval. While he appears to fold without great skill, he folds nevertheless. Viramontes contrasts Grandfather's advancing age with Nacho's youth, which for Grandfather, makes the situation even more unbearable. Nacho is one male character who isn't invested in gender roles, but rather in being himself. We learn that his mother refers to him as easygoing, encouraging his disregard for the constraints of gender. He reads fotonovelas geared toward female audiences and paints whatever he likes, because "life [is] too short" (Viramontes 240). Nacho's outlook is also significant because other male characters perceive him as a physically strong man, and this strength is often associated with masculinity. The McBride Boys recognize that it will require several of them to confront Nacho after he locks Alfonso in a lifeguard booth; Palo reminds Alfonso that "this Nacho is kind of bionic" (Viramontes 308). Nacho's strength, and his occasional heterosexual, teenage behavior, when he spies on Ermila and cannot contain his affection for her, make him an even more interesting character, as he simultaneously rejects the confines of gender and embodies a masculinity that is multi-faceted.

There are also a few otherworldly male characters in *Their Dogs Came With Them*, who generally support their families, including the women in their lives. Tío Angel is a mysterious male figure, who Viramontes describes as "holy and fearful" (159). He defends Turtle's family from her father, Frank, and genuinely cares about providing for them; it is suggested in the novel that he

always loved Turtle's mother. Turtle has fond memories of Tío Angel, and were he still alive, he may have been the one character that would not have given up on her. When he senses the adolescence that plagues Luis, he gives him a kiss, relating to him; he recognizes a younger version of himself in Luis, as Luis tries so hard to maintain a cool exterior. He doesn't fear this younger generation, unlike many of the other residents of the Eastside, as he understands them, and they generally respect him. Tío Angel's body bears a tattoo of The Last Supper, including all twelve apostles, with Jesus's head above his heart. Turtle describes Tío Angel as he arrives at her childhood home: "he brought an aura behind him as bright as La Virgen de Guadalupe but also somber as Judas" (Viramontes 156). Tío Angel defies good and evil, the mother and the traitor—he is a force that defends, but acts on his own terms.

Papa Tomás, Tranquilina's father (who is also a priest), is another one of these figures, and as a character he suggests a blending of beliefs, and a return to ancestral and indigenous practices. Tranquilina's mother, who Tranquilina refers to as Mama, tells her the story of her parents' escape from indentured servitude and Horseback, the owner of Rancho Paradiso. After running for four days, Tomás left a pregnant Mama to rest while he sought shelter, and she insists he rode the wind, soaring through the clouds. Mama explains that "since the first sun...the Azteca priests singled out men like her [Tranquilina's] father to be voladores" (Viramontes 44). These "magnificent half birds" were given feathers and breastplates to aid in their flight, but "after centuries of ritual" Tomás didn't require these tools, he needed only "mighty, willful faith" to make his ascent

(Viramontes 44). He is later described as a half bird in his old age as well, due to the talons on his toes: “Papa was barefoot, yellow clumps of flesh caked with calluses, toenails branched out into twisted, browning and unclipped appendages like the claws of a wild bird ready to scoop down and snatch its prey”

(Viramontes 85). Papa Tomás is invested in the church, yet this story and symbolism suggest a mixing of beliefs. Throughout the novel Tranquilina reflects on her and her parents’ ministry, and struggles with her faith. During the final scene of the novel, which I return to in my conclusion, Tranquilina rides the wind. In the end, she embraces her ancestors and the earth, flying as her father once did. Like Perfecto and Estrella, Papa Tomás significantly influences Tranquilina as she chooses her path, and performs her great act of resistance.

Initially, Viramontes’s male characters are persistently patriarchal and sometimes absent, but soon certain characters, like Perfecto, support and teach the women they interact with. Others, like Ben, recognize the rigid gender roles that attempt to constrict women’s lives. Nacho traverses gender boundaries, caring little for the patriarchal scripts that his father and grandfather live by. Alejo and Tío Angel are kind, and provide happiness for the women they love. Tranquilina follows the path of her father, Papa Tomás, and seeks refuge in her ancestors, the earth, and the wind. These male characters are not activists, but some of them are feminist characters. Unfortunately, by the end of their respective texts, Perfecto is contemplating leaving, Alejo is severely ill, Ben is missing, and Nacho, Tío Angel, and Papa Tomás are dead. These men cannot continue, not because they don’t want to, but because they are confronted with

death, and in Ben's case, consumed by mental illness. In Viramontes's feminist texts, women and their voices are prioritized. Both the patriarchal and the feminist male characters are ultimately secondary to their female counterparts; women are oppressed by but then resist patriarchal figures, and while they share common thoughts with their allies, women survive. These male characters are still hopeful, despite their deaths, because they suggest future alliances for men and women, and embrace the multiplicity of masculinity.

CHAPTER III  
THE INVISIBILITY AND HYPERVISIBILITY OF  
WOMEN, WORKERS, AND YOUTH

As we have seen, Viramontes's male characters impact the women in their lives, particularly within these women's homes. With her discussion of home, Bhattacharjee also explores the problematic use and construction of the terms private, public, and state in Western feminist theory. An example provided by Bhattacharjee of "conventional mappings" (340) of these terms is Catharine A. MacKinnon's *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Bhattacharjee notes how in this text "public," "government," and "state" are used almost interchangeably (340). As a solution to conflict in the "private" arena, MacKinnon and other Western feminists have stressed the need to project the private into the public. However, Bhattacharjee questions the publicness of the nation and the feasibility of this projection: "Immigration laws have *privatized* the nation; it is now a bounded space into which only some of the people can walk some of the time" (Bhattacharjee 344; her emphasis). Women (and men) without legal status in the United States cannot project the "private" into the "public," for they cannot access what is actually the private nation. She also provides a crucial example of the dual nature of the "private"; for domestic workers, another's home is a public space of employment. Hence, these "shifting definitions of the 'private' and the 'public'...reveal their construction to be largely imaginary" (Bhattacharjee 344).

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the nation is certainly not a "public" space for los piscadores who are not citizens of the United States, and arguably even for

those who are. The possibility of projecting private issues, or even the more public conditions of working in the fields, is absent. Immigration laws also restrict who is legally part of a family, further interfering in the “private” arena, as parents and children may have differing legal status. Without any legal rights, migrant workers are made invisible in this private nation. Viramontes suggests this invisibility in the novel, despite the fact that the members of Estrella’s family are U.S. citizens, when Estrella and her family begin the process of moving, and they “eras[e] the ruts of their shoeprints and the tracks of their boxes” (Viramontes 37), as if they were never there.

These invisible women and workers become hypervisible in other scenarios. The threat of being confronted by La Migra is visceral not only for workers who do not have documentation, but also for those who may not have documentation with them (but do, elsewhere) and/or are considered minors. Race and class trump citizenship, as it is assumed workers are not citizens. When Estrella is blinded by the lights at the baseball diamond, and wonders if La Migra are looking for her, we can imagine this sense of hypervisibility. Petra later tells Estrella,

‘Yo ya no voy a correr. No puedo más. [I’m not going to run any longer. I can’t anymore.]...No sense telling La Migra you’ve lived here all your life...Do we carry proof around like belly buttons?...Don’t run scared. You stay there and look them in the eye. Don’t let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they’ll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them...Tell them que tienes una madre aquí. [Tell them that you have a mother here.] You are not an orphan,’ and she pointed a red finger to the earth, ‘Aquí.’ [Here.] (Viramontes 62-63; translation mine)



Petra refers to the invisibility of these workers, which the average consumer (and border patrol worker) does not see when they purchase their vegetables, and the hypervisibility of migrant workers when La Migra arrest them. Petra claims that it doesn't matter if one is a citizen or not—La Migra only recognize a sea of workers, not individuals who may have differing circumstances. Invisibility and hypervisibility are present simultaneously, with no in between.

Petra also references Estrella's citizenship with this statement. The children's birth certificates (and other documents) are literally placed under Petra's statue of Jesucristo, or under the feet of Jesus. She suggests an ethical and moral right to this land, due to Estrella's birth here, and the labor that she performs. This earth is another mother to Estrella, a matrilineal notion that resonates with Petra's indigenous beliefs. Citizenship is rejected, though, in the novel's final scene, as Estrella becomes a Jesus figure, an angel, and "the termite-softened shakes crunch beneath her bare feet like the serpent under the feet of Jesus," which is the same location as where the birth certificates lie, a site of evil (Viramontes 175). As she stands on the barn, or cathedral's, roof, her heart's pounding is likened to bells, and Estrella "believe[s] her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed" (Viramontes 176). Estrella transforms into a beacon for those who subscribe to the new consciousness Viramontes proposes, that disregards citizenship and binds workers.

Invisibility and hypervisibility arise again when Estrella, her family, and Alejo visit the clinic. The clinic is physically a disappointment, which could work to their advantage, as Perfecto searches for any opportunities to barter his skills,

including a loose pole and the odor of dysfunctional plumbing. The nurse, with her fresh, red lipstick and pungent perfume, interacts with this family, but doesn't really see them. Alejo can barely stand, yet she doesn't take a moment to consider why Estrella desperately suggests they trade Perfecto's skills for the cost of the visit. The \$9.07 in Perfecto's wallet is all of the money they have, and somehow they must transport Alejo to a hospital twenty miles away, in their car, which has an empty tank of gas. While Estrella does not reveal these details, the nurse does not ask, and rather is annoyed that they don't leave more quickly, as she needs to pick up her kids. She does not consider that the \$5 discount she offers, condescendingly, is not enough, although the family is covered in mud from freeing their car's back wheels and discusses the cost heatedly. Frankly, she doesn't care. After they have paid, and Estrella realizes they must recover the money somehow, she does the only thing she can think of:

Estrella slammed the crowbar down on the desk, shattering the school pictures of the nurse's children, sending the pencils flying to the floor, and breaking the porcelain cat with a nurse's cap into pieces...Estrella knocked the folders which spread like cards on the floor...Estrella held out her hand, palm up. (Viramontes 149-150)

She later explains the situation to Alejo: 'They make you that way...You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick up a crowbar and break the pictures of their children, and all of a sudden they listen real fast' (Viramontes 151). Estrella's circumstances were somehow invisible to the nurse, and so Estrella was forced to act in a more violent, hypervisible way.

Estrella has an earlier interaction with another Anglo woman, a teacher named Mrs. Horn, who also does not see Estrella. Mrs. Horn, and other teachers

like her, spend little time teaching Estrella, and more time scrubbing her nails and inspecting her head for lice. Mrs. Horn wonders why Petra doesn't bathe Estrella more often, and her words hurt Estrella, revealing their cruel power. Estrella is invisible to Mrs. Horn as a student and an individual, and hypervisible as a dirty, migrant child. Burford also reads this teacher and the nurse as examples of women who "enact colonial power," preventing alliances between women (par. 6). The nurse in particular could act as an ally to Estrella and her family, but instead is

enmeshed in the institutions of racism and capitalism, and ensnared in her own set of gendered, classed, social expectations...Such a portrayal does theoretical work of pointing to some of the ideological divisions between women that have prevented alliances between women—or, in this case, the divisions that often cause Anglo women to be aligned with colonial power and institutions that exploit Chicanas. (Burford par. 25)

These women exercise institutional power in health care and education, and they reproduce the racism that is imbedded in these institutions. Viramontes encourages Anglo readers not to replicate the behavior of the nurse and the teacher, by including these insensitive characters, and therefore advocating for visibility and solidarity, rather than apathy, invisibility, and hypervisibility.

Naomi and María, in "Growing" and "The Jumping Bean," respectively, also navigate invisibility and hypervisibility. In their experience, these two extremes arise out of sexism, racism, and classism. As noted previously, Naomi's father shouts "TÚ ERES MUJER" (You are a woman) when Naomi questions the necessity of a chaperone (Viramontes 308). In this instant, Naomi is deemed invisible and hypervisible; she has become invisible as an individual,

for she is relegated to the category of “mujer,” yet she is hypervisible as a young woman, who must be chaperoned at all times, a beacon of young sexuality. When Naomi walks to Jorge’s house with her sister, a man flirts with her from his car, and in response she screams, ‘GO TO HELL, goddamn you!’ (Viramontes 309). This interaction underscores Naomi’s hypervisibility in public, as she simply strolls down the street. She refuses to accept this man’s heckling, though, demonstrating her willful resistance, similar to that of Estrella.

María does not exit her family’s home in “The Jumping Bean,” but she still experiences flashes of invisibility and hypervisibility. María has missed thirteen weeks of school. When a truant officer visits her home, he asks only one question, and after not really hearing María’s response, he berates her: ‘Is this the kind of life you wanna have, huh? Washing clothes, shoveling dog turd, huh?...Wiping the asses of fifteen kids like some old lady in the shoe, huh? Is that what you want, huh?’ (Viramontes 127). María tells him to ‘Fuck off’ and slams the door (Viramontes 127). The truant officer doesn’t see María, nor attempt to understand her predicament. She is invisible to him as an individual, and then hypervisible as she reacts strongly to his condescending questions. This truant officer serves as another example of how individuals within the school system reproduce institutional racism and alienate migrant children, similar to Mrs. Horn, the teacher in *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

When María confronts invisibility within her family, she has a different result. Viramontes writes that “he [her father] had no reason to see her. She was just one of the many children he labored for” (122). María is invisible within her

large family, although she assumes her mother's duties; her sister is also described as invisible. Together, these sisters claim their visibility. The title of the story originates both in this father, who "they called... 'the jumping bean,' because of his ability to scale a ladder towing more than his weight with the speed of a man half his age," and in jumping beans that are placed in María's father's lunch pail—tampering with his lunchbox is a daily obsession of his co-workers (Viramontes 122). When he returns home he shows the children the jumping beans, and María cracks one open, to see why it jumps. When she discovers a small, white caterpillar, she begins to unleash them all, for "it seemed unjust to find enjoyment in the entrapment of other living things" (Viramontes 130). María's father, who wanted only to dazzle his children, reacts harshly, particularly after telling María to 'Leave it alone' several times (Viramontes 130):

As of today, Papa had no job, no wife, now couldn't even win over the children's forgiveness without being accused of something. He raised his hand at her insubordination, but before he could strike her...she caught his raised hand in motion, and it stunned him, this betrayal of her nature. (Viramontes 130)

María transforms in this instant, and defies the patriarchal control her father assumes he must exert over his children in the absence of their mother; the younger daughter later comments that in the past her mother would have stood in the doorway and put "a stop to all of this madness" (Viramontes 131). María then challenges her father to continue showcasing the remaining bean, and not free the caterpillar, and he struggles with what to do, as "he had to make of her an example for the rest of the children" (Viramontes 131). In an act of solidarity, María's younger sister swipes the bean, plops it in her mouth, and swallows.

María identifies with these beans, as she too is constrained. Her act of defiance is one that frees her from her father's overreaction, and her sister rallies to her side, as she ingests the jumping bean, and deflects their argument, which María's father felt he must "win" in front of the other children. These young women seize their visibility with this resistance.

Viramontes not only presents the people that may be invisible to the general population in her work; the more detailed conditions of their labor are also made visible, particularly in "The Jumping Bean" and *Under the Feet of Jesus*. In "The Jumping Bean," María's father toils in the city, constructing the Security Pacific Bank. His body endures the difficult labor, for now: "They denied the sweat that bled like torrents over his eyes when he climbed the scaffolds with 160 pounds of cement on his back...they never imagined his rebelling bones collapsing like noisy spoons on the floor at the end of the day" (Viramontes 124). Even his co-workers refuse to see how taxing this work is for María's father, as he carries on without complaint or pause. Throughout *Under the Feet of Jesus* we are given a sense of how difficult fieldwork is, as well as the life that accompanies it. Viramontes identifies many of the daily uncertainties: "It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions on the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing" (4). Fruit picking is the last job the novel's characters wish to secure. Gumecindo thinks to himself that "he would work scrubbing the Hamburger King floor with a toothbrush before accepting another fruit-picking job again" (Viramontes 40). The risks and the

strain are too great, and these characters complete this work only because they have to, in order to survive.

Sandoval and Burford both focus on Viramontes's reappropriation of the Sun-Maid girl trademark in *Under the Feet of Jesus* as an example of how invisible farm labor is, and of Viramontes's contribution to making it visible. The marketing and packaging of Sun-Maid raisins displays a white woman wearing a bonnet, idyllically holding a basket of grapes. Estrella rejects the utter dishonesty of this packaging, and relates the physical difficulty of picking grapes: "The sun was white and it made Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles...The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink in the hot white soil..." (Viramontes 49-50). Estrella's entire body aches, from her eyes to her hips and back, as the sun beats down on her. The labor that makes raisins a reality is invisible, as is the exploitation of migrant workers. Sandoval notes that "even in California, the setting of the novel, where there exists a large agricultural industry, farmworkers are invisible to most. If their presence in the fields goes unnoticed, then certainly their exploitation is rarely considered by the general population" (86). Furthermore, Burford stresses that many consumers are unaware of the quantity of fieldwork that is performed by children: "approximately 409,000 children comprise about 25% of the agricultural labor in the United States," according to an article in *The Peace Review* from 2000 (Burford par. 16). Viramontes intervenes; her dedication to the visibility of these adult and child workers provides her audience with a new

perspective, one that persuades them to take notice and develop concern for piscadores like Estrella and her family.

Burford also points to the invisibility of the double burden that weighs on women workers, as they have responsibilities in the fields and at home. Petra is referred to as “the mother” often throughout the novel, and Burford argues that by privileging this title, Viramontes emphasizes Petra’s responsibilities as a mother (par. 17). Petra works even when she is pregnant, because she must, aggravating the varicose veins that plague her legs and consume her body (Burford par. 17). These women are caught in a vicious cycle, as “their bodies labor in the fields but the labor of childbearing also produces children, the products and laborers of a future capitalist system” (Burford par. 17). Viramontes reveals a current and historical reality for women fieldworkers, which entails their ceaseless labor.

In *Their Dogs Came With Them*, invisibility and hypervisibility are present in a variety of contexts. The have-nots are invisible to the haves, prompting Ben to make visible the nameless street woman in his writing. Turtle understands the power of invisibility, and tries to exercise it. She aggravates a man on the street, mostly out of boredom, and rather than continue their conflict, she pretends he is invisible: “she had learned the hard way that to render someone invisible was more painful than a cracked skull” (Viramontes 21). Ermila is invisible to her grandmother, as Grandmother only sees Ermila’s mother in her. She is hypervisible when she arrives home drunk, and her behavior clashes with her



grandmother's expectations. These characters interact with varying degrees of visibility in their daily lives.

The most prominent example of invisibility and hypervisibility in this novel, though, is that of young men; Viramontes often contemplates the perception of these individuals through Turtle. In one sense, Turtle seeks invisibility, as she snakes her way through the city. She does not want to be seen, not by gang members nor by the police. She also wishes her sex to be invisible, as it does not correspond with the gender she identifies with. Her interactions with others underscore her invisibility as an individual, her hypervisibility as a potential thief, and her successful visibility as a young man with those she does not know well (which reinforces her hypervisibility). When Turtle asks a woman for the time, the woman tightens her grip on her handbag. At the bus station there are similar reactions to Turtle, Luis, and Lucho, as people pass "sideways-glancing" with "their gawks, gazes, fascination, fear" (Viramontes 230). Ray, the owner of the Friendly Shop, dreads Turtle's approach, and he reassuringly runs his hand over the gun in his pocket. Inside the shop, he doesn't open the cash register, hoping to prevent a robbery. He is convinced Turtle is a young man, evidenced by his thoughts and his subsequent trip to the police station to correct Turtle's sex in the police report. Turtle realizes that her appearance as a young man affiliated with a gang heightens her hypervisibility, and so when she approaches Ray she thinks to herself, "Harmless as a girl" (Viramontes 255). Ultimately Turtle is shot by the sharpshooters, although they are unsure if she murdered Nacho; her hypervisibility overrides any uncertainty and results in her death.

While many of the male characters in Viramontes's texts contribute to the invisibility of women within the family home and extended ethnic community, men have similar experiences in other contexts, particularly young men. Women, workers, and youth are made invisible, via immigration laws, sexism, racism, and classism. When these characters are left with no recourse or recognition, and as a result act strongly, at times violently, they become hypervisible. Viramontes fights invisibility in her stories, striving for visibility, rather than hypervisibility. The daily acts of resistance performed by the women in Viramontes's stories, like María de la Luz and her younger sister with the jumping bean, assert their visibility, as they recognize their circumstances and imagine a new future. In my conclusion, I elaborate on other acts of resistance that arise in Viramontes's work.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the invisibility and hypervisibility that constrain women, and the patriarchal figures that oppress them, they resist. While Viramontes's male characters evolve, and they begin to form the same questions as the women in their lives, these men do not yet fully join in this resistance. Women lead the struggle, fighting for themselves and their communities.

At times these characters' resistance takes the form of simply questioning their lives and the lives of those around them, as their thoughts and observations may lead to future actions. Naomi questions her father's patriarchal code of conduct for women, as well as Eloy's altered behavior toward her. Ermila wonders about the future options for young women like herself, from professional opportunities to motherhood and the ostracization of certain women, like Concha. Ermila also imagines replacing the El Zócalo Fine Meats calendar at Salas Used Cars, where she works, with a "bare-bottom man with a cannon of an erection and balls of iron advertising La Pelota Bakery" (Viramontes 64). Removing the current calendar, displaying "bikini-clad women aiming their double-barrel chests," is too risky, but Ermila's thoughts are resistant ones (Viramontes 64). These thoughts motivate Naomi and Ermila to later speak out.

Other times, varying degrees of action occur, as these women outwardly resist. María de la Luz catches her father's hand as he moves to slap her, and her sister swallows the jumping bean that María and their father debate. Rini slips a Hostess Snowball wrapper into the backseat of Jan's car, because he sexually harassed and potentially abused her; her act is "a small subversion

because the fucker was so anal about the cleanliness of his car” (Viramontes 197). Ermila challenges the QA officers, when she shouts, “Hey, what’s the holdup?...We all wanna get home!” from her spot in line (Viramontes 289). She takes a risk, which results in a victory, and the hesitancy of others in line around her underscores her bravery. Grandmother requests custody of Ermila from the court, without consulting Grandfather, and when he later acts out, she reasserts her choice, stating, “If she goes, I go” (Viramontes 70). These everyday acts resist the domineering figures that are present in the different homes of these women, and in some cases, assert their visibility.

In *Their Dogs Came With Them*, there is also a more collaborative act of resistance, during which Ermila and her friends fight “against their individual doubts” and concentrate on “one communal goal” (Viramontes 198). They vandalize Jan’s car, spraying nail polish remover on it and then scratching words into the car’s surface with steel wool pads (Viramontes 199). This act of resistance occurs quickly, and quietly, but as Ermila walks away, she notes a profound sense of satisfaction:

Whatever laughter or disbelief, whatever overblown nerves Ermila had suppressed, now raised her spirit to the point that her steps felt buoyant and she felt an enormous craving for adventure...Ermila reveled in becoming one of the winds of the four directions and just for a moment, a fleeting moment at that, she experienced a larger-than-life ability to soar over just about anything. (Viramontes 199)

Ermila and her friends become the winds of the four directions, as they approach and then distance themselves from the car, and for a moment they can soar, just as Tranquilina rides the wind at the end of the novel. The solidarity that these

young women share allows them to resist, daringly, as they deface Jan's masculinity—his beloved car.

This novel ends with a final act of resistance by Tranquilina. After arranging Nacho and Turtle, as they lay dead on the ground, Tranquilina summons her parents, the tale of their escape, and ancestral spirits. She refuses to stop, continuing to walk:

She ignored the command to place her hands on her head. Her arms by her side, her fists clenched, she would not fear them. Shouting voices ordered her not to move, stay immobile, but she lifted one foot forward, then another, refusing to halt. Two inches, four, six, eight, riding the currents of the wilding wind. Riding it beyond the borders, past the cesarean scars of the earth, out to limitless space where everything was possible if she believed.  
(Viramontes 325)

Tranquilina resists the sharpshooters, and embraces the winds of mother earth; the “cesarean scars of the earth” again evoke the earth as a mother. She is cleansed by the rain that falls, and blinded by the lights that surround her.

Tranquilina confronts the state, and rejects it, opting for mobility; she will cross borders, whether they are the checkpoints that the QA has arranged in the city, or those that divide nations, and enter a transnational, borderless place, where she will not be limited by the restrictions that weigh heavily on the Eastside.

Tranquilina's act is a transnational feminist one, a dynamic, fluid resistance, which she completes not just for herself, but for an entire community.

With these conversations, of home, masculinity, visibility, and resistance, Viramontes introduces us to and reminds us of the issues that exist in our communities and nation, posing personal, academic, and political challenges to her readers. Viramontes describes the homes that are not havens for their

residents, homes that are unreachable, and women who do not have homes to return to, encouraging her readers to relate to various conceptions of home and consider how homes, particularly the nation, can better shelter inhabitants. She introduces her readers to farmworkers, who are often invisible, and yet provide us with sustenance, imploring us to take action. She reminds us of the abuse of patriarchal power, simultaneously challenging stereotypical notions of masculinity and pointing to how race, class, and sexuality also impact men. She makes us wonder, how do we address the double bind of invisibility and hypervisibility? Her characters inspire readers to resist, in their thoughts and actions. Through her texts, Viramontes insists that we commit ourselves to better understanding the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality, and build transnational feminist alliances, which prioritize increased pesticide regulation, farmworker rights, and gender equality, and confront environmental racism and homelessness. Viramontes, like her characters, persists, inspiring her readers to continue waging the fight for themselves and others.

#### Afterward

In this final section, I return to the scene I describe in the introduction, where Petra, Estrella, and Perfecto wander through a general store. This moment predates many of the events of the novel, but appears in the center of *Under the Feet of Jesus*. In this location, at a juncture in the novel when many of the characters' flashbacks have ceased, the scene is highlighted as a crucial memory. In this passage, Viramontes articulates the poverty and exploitation of los piscadores, as Petra cannot afford the goods that the store contains, despite

the store's ramshackle state. Perfecto is introduced in this scene, and everything from his name to his kind words and acts suggest a masculinity that is rooted in family, hard work, and generosity. Through Petra, Estrella, and Perfecto, Viramontes continues to develop multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory characters who test gender roles and resist the oppression in their lives. In this short flashback, Viramontes makes visible invisible women and workers, including their daily lives, their labor, and their dreams.

The general store is a dilapidated space, which Petra and her children are forced to depend on. To reach the store, the family must walk from their home, and then cross the highway in the hot sun. This trek is tiring and somewhat dangerous, as the family endures the heat and races across the highway, where vehicles speed by, oblivious to pedestrians. While a trip to the store may be a simple errand for another patron who pumps gas into his car, it is a difficult endeavor for Petra's family. Petra envies the convenience of this customer's car, as well as the paycheck he must receive at the end of each week to afford such luxuries. Inside, the store is littered with wares, from groceries to brooms to fabric and pirated cassette tapes. Christmas bells hang near its entrance from "a rusty thumb tack," although it is summer (Viramontes 108). This store is neglected, as it remains the same, no matter what the season. Everything in it, from the bells to the tack that they are suspended from, is dusty and decrepit. The lackluster state of this store emphasizes the poverty of los piscadores and the exploitation of their labor, as they cannot afford the commodities it contains.

The noise from the nearby highway and the surrounding environment also enter the store, which add to its shabby state. When Perfecto fixes the broken freezer motor and it begins to hum again, Petra likens it to “how the bus engine sounded climbing the steep Interstate 5 mountain pass” (Viramontes 109). This freezer does not quietly purr, but rather roars in the back of the store. Petra relates the freezer to her experience and the highway that she crosses to enter the store, and so the environment outside the store creeps in. Similarly, above the cash register hang “yellowed and dusty crepe paper draped like sagging cable lines” (Viramontes 109). The crepe paper has aged, and like the Christmas bells, is not a temporary decoration. Viramontes compares it to the cable lines that likely accompany the highway, and again the outside and inside of the store converge. The store is a site of modernization fallen into disrepair, much like its surroundings.

The produce in this store is damaged; it is contrasted to the fruits and vegetables Petra, Estrella, and Perfecto pick in the fields. The fruit is piled carelessly in zinc tubs and crammed against the wall. This produce may be “firm and solid out in the hot fields; but here in the store, only the relics remained: squished old tomatoes spilled over onto the bruised apples and the jalapeños mixed with soft tomatillos and cucumbers peeked from between blotchy oranges” (Viramontes 110). The careful work of los pescadores seems squandered in the store’s handling of these now forlorn looking specimens. Unlike larger grocery stores, produce is not a focal point in this store, but rather blends in with the



other unkempt merchandise. Like everything else in the store, these fruits and vegetables are marred and forgotten.

Petra cannot afford this produce, despite her daily proximity to it, and instead inspects less perishable foods. She considers El Pato Tomato Sauce, Carnation Milk, Spam, Tang, garlic, and onions. Several of these foods are cheap, processed, filling, and nutrient deficient. Petra settles on only Spam, garlic, and onions, primarily for their versatility. Although she needs garlic to calm her raging varicose veins, she also reasons that she can use it in stomachache tonics and hot chile. Petra must justify every cent that she spends and waste nothing.

A miserly man presides over the store, chuckling at his tired jokes. This proprietor looms over his “ledger book as thick as a Bible” (Viramontes 108). The enormity of this book emphasizes the poverty that los piscadores face, and the cyclical nature of their poverty—mothers like Petra cannot accumulate enough money to pay their debts and finance their present and future; therefore, they are trapped in debt. This man at least partially participates in the exploitation of migrant workers, clinging to his “holy” ledger. Before Petra and Estrella leave the store, the man’s moustache is described as so thin that it resembles the dash he inscribes after each credit; even his body carries the signs of his participation in the oppression of migrant workers.

In this passage, Petra is firmly connected to La Virgen de Guadalupe, a Virgin Mary that has strong associations with indigenous and Mexican Catholic history and beliefs. In 1531, Juan Diego, a peasant, was spoken to by a young,

brown woman in Nahautl, who appeared to him over the Hill of Tepeyac and who he recognized as La Virgen de Guadalupe. This icon embodies a mixture of indigenous and Catholic beliefs, a blending that is consistent with Viramontes's development of Petra in the novel. For example, Petra arranges a Catholic altar in the family's home, but also believes that scorpions will not penetrate the circle she asks Estrella to draw in the dirt around the family's bungalow. A poster of La Virgen is "tacked between the posters of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe holding her white billowing dress down" (Viramontes 110). Three icons watch over this store, but La Virgen is certainly the most significant, and in Petra's eyes is "raised...above a heavenly mound of bulbous garlic" (Viramontes 110). Petra ingests garlic ceaselessly, to ease her varicose veins, and here this garlic is made holy, the garlic that Petra will consume. Petra also sees "herself reflected in La Virgen's glossy downcast eyes" (Viramontes 110). These "downcast eyes" reference the humbleness of La Virgen, as well as her sacrifice as a mother. La Virgen is "adorned by red and green and white twinkling Christmas lights which surround the poster like a sequin necklace" (Viramontes 110). The Christmas lights, which, like the Christmas bells, are out of season, celebrate this poster in a cheap manner, as they are compared to a sequin necklace; yet, they are also festive, and enable Petra to see her reflection in La Virgen's eyes. The iconography of La Virgen depicts her as hovering in the sky, and Petra, as she identifies with this icon, imagines she is floating on a cloud: "her bare toes were blue against the gray garlic, and for a moment, it looked like she stood amidst the clouds" (Viramontes 111). Petra reaches into the tub of garlic, and the bulbs

plummet “onto the floorboards like hail from the sky” (Viramontes 111). The bulbs of garlic transform into the hail that falls from beneath La Virgen and the clouds that she floats on, and Petra sees herself rise with La Virgen. When Perfecto locates a bulb that smells of rosewater, Petra exclaims, ‘See? You can smell it in this one, the roses, see, and you don’t believe me! Look, she said, holding up the bulb, it’s even blessed by La Virgen!’ (Viramontes 112). Petra makes a connection between roses and La Virgen, as during Juan Diego’s encounter with La Virgen he found rare roses on Tepeyac Hill, and later these roses fell to reveal an image of La Virgen imprinted on his cloak. Clearly, Petra is La Virgen—Viramontes refers to Petra as “the mother” throughout the novel. She is the mother of Estrella; Estrella is presented as a new Jesus figure at the end of the story, when the head of Petra’s Jesucristo statue falls off of His body onto the floor. Afterwards, Estrella ascends, and the barn roof under her toes is likened to the serpent under Jesus’s feet. Her heart beats like “bells of the great cathedrals...powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed” (Viramontes 176). Petra, La Virgen, and Estrella, Jesus, or an angel similar to Him, are religious and iconic characters.

Petra and Estrella also test this iconography, though, and suggest an expansion of these roles. There are several times when Petra is described as angry in the novel because she is so tired and because her life is so challenging. While she does care for her family and sacrifices herself, she also has other moments, such as when she bursts out of her home and leaves her children, intent on escaping them. Petra is not a silent, subservient figure—she is a strong

character who fights for herself and her family, and who sometimes is pushed to her limit and makes mistakes.

Similarly, Estrella has her faults, and doesn't quite identify with her mother's beliefs. When Petra hands Estrella the bulb of garlic, she shrugs her shoulders, "not yet able to see the flower in the bulb" (Viramontes 112). While Estrella humors her mother's requests, such as smelling the bulb of garlic, she doesn't quite see the world as Petra does. Instead, Estrella develops a stronger investment in Perfecto and his tools. Estrella is her mother's daughter, but she is also a young woman who seeks a new way of life.

Perfecto is also introduced in this scene, and his relationship with Petra and Estrella is initiated. By inserting this memory in the middle of the story, readers can better understand the significance of Perfecto, his red tool chest, and his ability to fix anything. Petra and Perfecto's family depend heavily on Perfecto, for his skills and the extra income he earns, and his tools are later Estrella's inspiration to read and learn. As Petra begins to rise, and imagine herself as La Virgen, Perfecto is the one who summons her back to the store: "she saw with her own eyes bulbous clouds carrying her, until a big brown hand clamped a bunch of bulbs and the hand brought her back" (Viramontes 111). Perfecto's hand grounds Petra; throughout the novel, Perfecto helps Petra to remain strong for her children. Perfecto is a male character who supports his family and contributes to their survival through the work he performs with his hands. His masculinity involves generosity and sacrifice, and he isn't concerned

with the patriarchal control that many of Viramontes's male characters cling to. He aids this family in surviving from one day to the next, on the ground.

Petra's description of Perfecto underscores the poverty he also fights, as well as the impact fieldwork has on the bodies of los piscadores. Petra's eyes trace Perfecto's frame, from the hand he extends to his boots and then his head:

She followed the hand up his wiry body so thin he needed a good meal. His work pants were cuffed above his boots, large cuffs deep enough to be pockets, and from under the thick smell of incense, she saw a cap of baldness rising to the surface. (Viramontes 111)

Although he is an older man, Perfecto hasn't had the luxury of gaining weight or purchasing clothes that fit him. Petra continues:

Gray stubble lingered in the deep canyons of his cheeks. He looked old, but the nature of their lives had a way of putting twenty years on a face, so that a man of fifty looked like he was seventy, and perhaps she looked fifty herself, though she was only thirty-three at the time. (Viramontes 111)

The environment and its "canyons" are used to describe the contours of Perfecto's face, emphasizing the connection between los piscadores and the land. A few moments later, Petra describes Perfecto's hand, which is "the texture of tree bark," and leaves splinters in her fingers (Viramontes 112); similarly, as Perfecto picks up his toolbox, "his branch fingers" curl around its handle (Viramontes 113). Perfecto is an extension of the land, which Petra recognizes as they form a bond. Their bodies are also inscribed with the difficult work they perform, as years accumulate on their faces. Perfecto and Petra's bodies speak to their labor and their interactions with the land.

Perfecto's departure from the store is paralleled with Petra and Estrella's; as these characters open and walk through the store's door, they embark upon

their future, and the other events of the novel. Petra holds the door open for Perfecto as his bag of ice drips down his back. When Petra exits the store, she inspects her daughter Cookie's mouth, wondering what is in it. Perfecto gave ice cubes to the children who were instructed to wait outside the store and Petra then thinks, "Ice, what [is] in a piece of ice?" (Viramontes 114). Her heart is full of hope, as she decides that she will trust Perfecto Flores, although his proclamation of "Trust me" was directed at the proprietor inside the store and not Petra (Viramontes 109). While ice is delicate, and can melt, water is as scarce as ice in and around the fields; Petra is right to invest her hope and trust in Perfecto and his ice. By the time Petra, Estrella, and Perfecto leave the store, it is clear that their futures shall be intertwined.

*Under the Feet of Jesus* is mostly written in English, with some Spanish splashed across its pages. Viramontes includes just enough Spanish to give this language a strong presence, although overall there is still a small amount. This Spanish is not italicized or translated; rather, it is integrated into the text. In an interview, Viramontes commented that some readers resist the Spanish that she uses, complaining that it is too prevalent in this novel. Viramontes rejects this claim, as she notes that other writers, particularly white, male authors, often use multiple languages in literature for aesthetic reasons, and are not criticized for it (Flys-Junquera 227). In reality, Viramontes's use of Spanish is minimal, but it has a significant impact on the text, as it inserts multi-lingual and transnational elements in the story.

There are also moments when Viramontes writes dialogue in English, but there exists an uncertainty regarding if her characters are actually speaking in English, or if readers are presented with a translation. During a later passage, when the family takes Alejo to the clinic, there is a moment when Estrella is conversing with Perfecto and Petra in front of the nurse, and it is clear that they all must be speaking in Spanish, due to what they are saying. However, only a fraction of the conversation is written in Spanish, and none of it is spoken by Estrella—she almost never speaks Spanish in the novel, despite her bilingualism. In these instances, Viramontes serves as the reader’s translator, employing the “muted bilingualism” that Castillo and Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba discuss (164). Spanish and English are present simultaneously, although much of the Spanish is silenced.

Mainly, the scene in the general store is written in English. However, the first words which Perfecto and Petra speak are Spanish ones, as Perfecto swears from the back of the store and Petra mutters her disapproval to Estrella. These words are echoed in another part of the novel, when Perfecto curses and Petra repeats her response from the general store: ‘¿Y qué ganas hablando así?’ (And what do you gain, talking like that?) (Viramontes 128). Perfecto and Petra’s words align appropriately with their personalities—Perfecto doesn’t speak often, but sometimes must vent his frustration, and Petra doesn’t see how these particular expressions aid Perfecto. When Perfecto speaks to Petra for the first time in the general store, Petra replies in Spanish: ‘Gracias. Muy amable’ (Thank you. You’re very kind.) (Viramontes 112). Perfecto mirrors Petra’s words, but in

English, as Petra holds the door open for him: “You’re very kind, Miss” (Viramontes 113). Petra and Perfecto already complement one another, in their words and thoughtfulness. Spanish is the language they are most comfortable with, and they speak much of the Spanish in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Many times words that are crucial or contain a greater amount of emotion are written in Spanish, including these examples; however, we may question Perfecto’s response to Petra when he tells her she is very kind, and wonder if it is translated. Although the Spanish in this scene is small in quantity, it makes a strong impression on readers.

In this short passage, Viramontes makes her characters visible, from their daily struggles and resistance to their dreams. Petra is a woman who works tirelessly, feeds her family on a miniscule budget, and falls in love while hovering over a mound of garlic. Perfecto is a man who uses his hands to pick fruit, repair appliances, and, as it turns out, intrigue his future partner. His hands support his family and help to make ends meet. As readers, we see these characters and their predicaments; however, we also share in their tender moments. In her writing, Viramontes presents despair and hope; the despair motivates her readers to think more deeply about racism and classism, and the hope insists that readers do not forget the many dimensions of any person and life, and relate to the fictional but very real people Viramontes presents in her work. Petra, Estrella, and Perfecto carry on, hoping for a brighter future.



## NOTES

1. The articles that inspired my readings of invisibility and hypervisibility do not fall within the scope of this thesis. M. Jacqui Alexander and Amy Lind have both written about invisibility and hypervisibility as they relate to the state and homosexuality; homosexuality is often made invisible in legal structures and development policy (including policy regarding the nuclear family), but male queer bodies, in particular, are then made hypervisible in relation to public health. Viramontes does not typically present a plurality of sexualities in her work. For this reason, I do not delve into Alexander and Lind's articles, but do acknowledge their influence here.
2. Mohanty shifts from her previous use of "Western" and "Third World" to "North/South" and "One-Third/Two-Thirds Worlds"; the latter terms more fluidly acknowledge communities within and across national borders.
3. The names in Viramontes's texts are often charged. "Hidalgo" also means "nobleman" and "Alejo" references the verb *alejar*, which means "to move away" or "to remove to a greater distance." However, Estrella creates this last name, and Alejo's family's last name may be Méndez; Alejo's cousin Gumecindo refers to Alejo as Méndez in one instance.
4. I have chosen not to italicize Spanish words in my thesis, but when quoting others, I default to their formatting.

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