

Familia Fictions: Writing the Family in Tomás Rivera's . . . And the Earth Did Not Devour Him and Sandra Cisneros' Caramelo

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According to Latino writer Ilan Stavans, “Genealogy rules Latino literature tyrannically” and “fiction is a device used to explore roots”(54). While it is almost impossible to dispute the idea that the topic of the family is central to Chicana and Chicano writing, Stavans signals that such dominance must be weighed against authorial uses of the family motif as part of literary creations. The novels that will be examined in this chapter are very different. Tomás Rivera’s . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* was originally written in Spanish in 1971. Set in rural Utah, this brief novel is a coming-of-age tale, or bildungsroman, that chronicles the experiences that will help the unnamed narrator make the transition from childhood to adulthood. *Caramelo*, a 2003 book by Sandra Cisneros, is a lengthy, fragmented novel divided into three parts. Beginning with the Mexican Revolution and ending sometime in the 1970s, *Caramelo* is also a bildungsroman, but the narrator finds her way in the world by rewriting the stories that comprise her family’s history to create her own story.

These novels clearly reflect the very different times in which they were written. Rivera’s almost exclusive concentration on male characters places his novel firmly within the first wave of Chicano nationalist writers, whose emphasis was on community and solidarity. As Santiago Daydí-Tolson suggests in his reading of the novel: “If the unidentified boy represents the collective mind of the group, it could be suggested that he does not constitute a truly individual character, but the representation of a whole generation. Rivera himself uses the singular to refer to the collective when he talks about the Chicano in general and says that ‘this is the kind of character I tried to portray in my work’” (Daydí-Tolson 137).

In contrast, by focusing on the difficulties that the family creates for a young woman who longs to fashion her own identity, Cisneros calls into question the possibility that any individual can ever truly represent the whole collective and even whether they should be required to do so. Gabriela F. Arredondo has mentioned Cisneros as one of a number of Chicana writers who use the family motif not only to reflect on women's home lives, but also to rewrite the history of the Chicano movement: "By focusing on the centrality of home and providing critical perspectives on the family, these Chicanas 'talk back' to Chicano nationalist discourse and patriarchy" (8). Just as the young protagonists of the two novels in question interpret and unravel the family histories they are told, this chapter will seek to determine the ways in which each work represents very different perspectives on the Chicano family—perspectives that are profoundly shaped by the generational and gender differences between their authors.

In order to understand why the family is such an integral part of Chicano literature, we must briefly review the history of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States. The American Southwest was originally settled in 1542 by Spanish colonizer Hernán Cortés in the name of the Spanish crown. Two centuries later, twenty-one Catholic missions were established along 500 miles of the Californian coast. Although some of the settlers at this time came from Spain, most were Mexicans recruited from the ranks of the desperately poor and lured with the promise of equipment, food, and cattle (Takaki 166–71). Mexicans initially welcomed immigrants from the United States, but this amicable acceptance came to an abrupt end in the 1840s, as settlers dreaming of wealth and land flooded into California during the gold rush. The state of Texas played a key role in the conflicts between American settlers and the Mexican government. Many of the North Americans who had settled in Texas during the 1820s were slaveholders, but in the 1830s, the Mexican government outlawed slavery and limited further emigration from the United States (Shorris 160). In response, a band of North Americans began an armed insurrection in

1836. The Mexican side was led by Mexico's President Santa Anna, who was later deposed, but served again as president from 1841 to 1844. According to a number of commentators, including John S. D. Eisenhower, it was the Mexican president's obstinacy in continuing the conflict with Texas that ultimately led to the Mexican-American War, which took place from 1846 to 1848:

Santa Anna's worst mistake as president was to continue the Texas border war. The incursions, killings, and atrocities on both sides were lavishly reported in the United States—always from the Texan viewpoint. This constant flow of war news kept the people of the United States militantly sympathetic to their blood relations in Texas. Many Americans, most of them perhaps, were no longer in any mood to allow the rights of Mexico to have any influence upon the ethics of United States policy. (Eisenhower 15–16)

The defeat of Mexico was sealed in 1848 by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which forever changed the destiny of the Mexicans who remained in what had become the American Southwest. David C. Gutiérrez notes that this treaty provided for the payment of \$15 million by the United States for over half of Mexico's lands—Texas, California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. It formally granted the full protection of the United States Constitution and citizenship to all Mexicans who chose to remain in the territory north of the new international border (Gutiérrez 13). In practice, however, deeply ingrained racism toward Mexicans and their status as a minority in the new North American states meant that the new Mexican Americans were in no position to insist on their constitutional rights.

The early twentieth century saw the first wave of mass emigration to the United States as Mexico was in turmoil following the Mexican Revolution. Generally from the poorer echelons of society, these immigrants usually had little formal education in Spanish, or were illiterate

altogether, and they did not speak English. Consequently, most secured poorly-paid employment, lived in substandard housing, and frequently endured racism. Not only did Mexicans and Mexican Americans endure these hardships, but it was clear that they were only welcome in the United States if they assimilated. Attempts to deal with the presence of Mexicans concentrated on homogenizing them and insisting that they adopt what were, for them, Anglo customs: “Mexicans became a favorite target for assimilationists: they were expected to shed their cultural distinctiveness and adopt Anglo standards (household and family care practices, ‘American’ cooking, hygiene). These Americanization programs were generally unsuccessful, since they failed to deal with the hard economic and social realities faced by most Chicanos” (Camarillo 225–26). Ultimately, Americanization programs never had the chance to succeed, and when the Great Depression brought them to a sudden end, the government sought to get rid of immigrants altogether rather than assimilate them. Nonetheless, these programs had a profound effect on Mexican American communities, as many felt that the only way that they could successfully participate in North American society was to minimize their differences.

Given the suspicion with which Mexican customs were viewed, it is not surprising that the home is often presented as space of refuge and comfort in Chicano literature, as Pat Mora asserts in her 1997 novel *House of Houses*: “This is a ‘world that we can call our own,’ this family space through which generations move, each bringing its gifts, handing down languages and stories, recipes for living, gathering around the kitchen table to serve one another” (7). Mora’s account stresses the persistence of traditions through the generations, rather than their abandonment, and presents the family as a repository of a unique identity signaled by its members speaking Spanish or indigenous languages, sharing stories, and enjoying their traditional foods.

Like Mora, Rivera has tended to represent the family as a very positive force against the pressures of a society that marginalized people of Mexican descent. In an essay on Chicano literature, he identifies

three key themes that are characteristic of Chicano authors, beginning with the home: “*La casa, el barrio* and *la lucha* are constant elements in the ritual of Chicano literature.¹ I shall start with *la casa* as one of three parts in this ritual. *La casa* is to me the most beautiful word in the Spanish language. It evokes the constant refuge, the constant father, the constant mother. It contains the father, the mother, and the child” (Rivera 22–23). It is not surprising, given this decidedly idealistic view of the family, that the notion of familial bonds as an unwavering source of support and affection is a salient theme in Rivera’s novel.

The protagonist of . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* is an unnamed young boy whose family members are impoverished Mexican American farm workers. Through his observations and experiences, the reader is drawn into the world of migrant farm laborers, who are paid poorly and forced to live in primitive conditions. Their degradation is such that in the episode entitled “The Children Couldn’t Wait,” the protagonist, his brothers and his father—all of whom work the fields together—risk being fired merely for sneaking sips of water from a tank meant for cattle. Although at times this young boy rebels against his family, and particularly against his mother’s faith in a God who seems indifferent to their suffering, he comes to understand that his family is his sanctuary. When he is refused service by a racist barber, for instance, his first thought is to turn to his father, certain that he will comfort him: “He crossed the street . . . but then the barber came out and told him to leave. Then it all became clear to him and he went home to get his father” (103).

The child is also aware that his father wants what is best for him and is determined that his son will finish school so that he can realize his dream of becoming a telephone operator—a job far removed from the backbreaking work of a farm laborer. His pride in his son’s ambition is obvious when he talks to his friend: “I told the boss the other day and he laughed. I don’t think he believes my son can do it, but that’s ‘cause he doesn’t know him. He’s smarter than anything” (95). In order to ensure that his son finishes the school year, his father pays a couple

who are friends of the family to look after the boy while the rest of the family travels to another town to work. Unbeknownst to his father, this couple, Don Laíto and Doña Bone, are thieves who murder an old man to take his money and then force the boy to help them dispose of the body. The corruption and amorality of this couple again reinforces the idea of the boy's family as a positive element in his life, and he is desperate to be reunited with them. Even in his darkest moments with Don Laíto and Doña Bone, the boy takes comfort in the knowledge that he was sent to live with them because his parents wanted a better life for him: "I thought of how my Dad had paid them for my room and board and how even the Anglos liked them so much. All that my parents wanted was for me to finish school so I could find me some job that wasn't so hard" (101).

Cisneros' *Caramelo* also has a young person as its protagonist. Celaya, who is referred to as Lala, grows up in Chicago with her Mexican father and Mexican American mother. Like the young boy in Rivera's novel, Lala attempts to make sense of the world largely through the family dramas she witnesses and the stories that family members tell her. As the family moves from Mexico to Chicago and back on annual visits to her grandmother's home, she hears stories of wars, doomed love affairs, and family disputes, all of which are peppered with popular cultural references from both sides of the border. Often these stories are passed from generation to generation and exposed as myths or downright lies, but they still play an important part in her construction of her own identity. Lala, like the young boy in . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, rebels against her family on occasion and often questions their versions of history; as she matures, however, she also learns to see her family as flawed human beings who, like her, face a barrage of conflicting messages as they attempt to negotiate the contradictions and tensions of living between Mexico and the United States.

As in Rivera's novel, the family is a primary source of consolation and protection for the young protagonist of *Caramelo*. The novel is dedicated to Cisneros's father, although she has noted in numerous in-

interviews that it was her mother who encouraged her to get an education and become a writer. In fact, Cisneros' father only supported her decision to major in English at college because he saw college as a way for his daughter to marry well (Brackett 27). Despite her awareness of her father's limited ambitions for her, Cisneros has noted in an essay significantly titled "Only Daughter" that her work is largely inspired by her relationship with him, saying "I wanted my father to understand what it was I was scribbling, to introduce me as 'My only daughter, the writer.' Not as 'This is only my daughter. She teaches.'" She added that "In a sense, everything I have ever written has been for him, to win his approval even though I know my father can't read English words" (Castillo-Speed 157).

In *Caramelo*, the close relationship between Lala and her father, Inocencio, is one of the most touching aspects of the narrative. It is her father who teaches Lala Spanish, and he constantly calls her affectionate names such as *mi cielo*, or "my heaven." As the only daughter in a family with six sons, Lala faces repeated teasing from her brothers, but, like the model of Rivera's constant father, Inocencio is always there to defend her: "—Don't pick on Lalita, Father reminds Lolo. — She's your only sister and the baby" (241). Cisneros, like Rivera, presents a number of situations in *Caramelo* in which the outside world seems threatening to the young protagonist. When her father gets her a job helping the housekeeper at the local priest's house, Lala is overwhelmed by the unfamiliar work and terrified by the long journey home in the dark, and she refuses to return after her first day. Her father had arranged for her to take the job so that she could earn much-needed money to pay the tuition for her private Catholic school, but instead of worrying about the money that they will lose if she does not work, her mother and father immediately agree with her, and Inocencio reassures Lala that she does not have to go back: "Don't worry Lalita. We'll tell *el padrecito* that I don't permit you to return. It's too dark outside when you come home. How does he expect a young lady to be walking alone after dark? Doesn't he realize we are Mexican?" (322).

Although both novels cast the family in an positive light, the narratives nonetheless reflect the particular tensions experienced by the children of impoverished Mexican families. The protagonist of . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* is acutely aware that his family is poor. He and his younger siblings have to work in the fields with their parents and when both his father and his brother suffer from sunstroke, he vents his frustration at their circumstances: “Why Dad and then my little brother? He’s only nine years old. Why? He has to work like a mule buried in the earth. Dad, Mom and my little brother here, what are they guilty of?” (111). Lala, meanwhile, experiences deep disappointment when the family finally manages to buy their own home, only to discover that it is decrepit and infested with mice and insects with no money for an exterminator: “It’s always about cutting corners. Always about something shimmering on the wall when you turn off the lights. Or something creepy scurrying off along the floorboards. It’s always, always about being afraid to get up in the middle of the night. And being scared to eat from a half-open box of corn flakes” (313).

Both of these young protagonists endure difficult living conditions and experience a sense of marginalisation from the dominant society. While their families are presented as loving and supportive, belonging to these families can be, conversely, a cause for shame in the outside world. The young boy in . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* risks his father’s wrath by defending himself in a fistfight against a racist schoolmate (92–3); likewise, Lala is embarrassed by her father’s poor clothing and rumpled appearance when they meet the parish priest: “I wish Father hadn’t insisted on coming straight from the shop. He’s as nubby as a towel. Even his mustache has lint. When he sits down, I pick the bits of string and tufts of cotton off of him” (319). Lala is dominated by her awareness of the priest’s superior status and therefore tries to make her father look less like a working man to lessen her sense of intimidation when meeting a father figure far more powerful than her own. Similarly, the young boy’s fear of his parents is diminished by his need to defend himself against racist taunts at school.

Themes in the novels begin to diverge, however, when it comes to expressing gender roles within the family. Rivera presents the Mexican American family as an archetype—the boy’s father is hardworking, authoritative, and loyal to his family. While his mother is also portrayed as an authority figure, she is predominantly cast in the typical role of the self-sacrificing angel who is the guardian of morality and religious tradition. The opening lines of the novel describe the mother’s custom of leaving an offering for spirits, an act not only suggesting her superstitions and adherence to outmoded rituals, but one reflecting her obligations as a Mexican woman: “What his mother never knew was that every night he would drink the glass of water that she left under the bed for the spirits. She always believed that they drank the water and so continued doing her duty” (85).

For Lala, the close, protective relationship she enjoyed with her father as a young girl becomes stifling and repressive as she becomes a teenager. The Spanish language—once used to communicate love—has been transformed by the father’s awareness of his daughter’s physical maturation; it has become a language of patriarchal oppression that uses words of hatred to censure Lala for imagined indiscretions that she has not even thought to commit. When Lala innocently shares with her father her desire to live alone when she grows up, she is met with harsh condemnation: “If you leave your father’s house without a husband you are worse than a dog. You aren’t my daughter. You aren’t a Reyes. You hurt me just talking like this. If you leave alone you leave like, and forgive me for saying this but it’s true, *como una prostituta*. Is that what you want the world to think? *Como una perra*, like a dog” (360).

The issue of the ways in which Chicano culture has relegated women to a secondary role, both within the family and in society, has been much debated. In her seminal critical text *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (2007), Gloria Anzaldúa asserts that Chicano culture privileges the family unit and community ties at the expense of individual autonomy. She outlines the resulting repression that women have traditionally endured as follows:

The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*.² If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favour of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. (39)

Cherrie Moraga, in her writings on the sexism that is endemic in Chicano culture, goes further, arguing that gender divisions within families weaken the community's ability to counter the oppression its members endure from the dominant white society: "We believe the more severely we protect the sex roles within the family, the stronger we will be as a unit in position to the Anglo threat. And yet, our refusal to examine all the roots of the lovelessness in our families is our weakest link and softest spot" (110).

Rivera has been criticized for the one-dimensionality of the female characters in . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* and their marginal status as mothers, daughters, and partners rather than central characters in their own right. In her analysis, Patricia de La Fuente notes that the novel reflects the society of its time and that Rivera's interest is not in foregrounding the experiences of the female characters but in depicting the viewpoint of his young male protagonist. Notwithstanding these qualifications, she is unambiguous in her critique of his presentation of the female characters: "Rivera's female characters are, with rare exceptions, stereotypical, totemic women, even caricatures, and contribute a muted, often inconsequential background to the male experience. Their humanity is arbitrarily submerged and at times trivialized" (De La Fuente 82). Rivera's novel never confronts the issue of gender oppression or the marginalization of women.

The vignette "The Night Before Christmas" uncharacteristically focuses on a female character, but the woman remains a shadowy presence defined by her roles as mother and wife. This woman suffers from agoraphobia but forces herself to go shopping to get Christmas presents for her children. Her outing ends in disaster when she is impris-

oned after fleeing a crowded store in panic, unaware that she has not paid for the gifts. Her dilemma, which results from her desire to please her children, is resolved when her husband explains the situation to a notary public. The solution to her panic attacks is also provided by her husband: “Just stay here inside the house and don’t leave the yard. There’s no need for it anyway. I’ll bring you everything you need” (Rivera 134). This episode both trivialises the woman’s anxiety and infantilises her; once her husband is in control of the situation, there is no need to examine the causes of her trauma or help her to regain some autonomy as an individual. This episode offers ample opportunity to explore the wider symbolism of this women’s fear and dependence in a profoundly macho culture, yet Rivera presents it as a naturalistic portrait of a neurotic woman who is fortunate to have a husband who comes to her rescue.

Cisneros, in sharp contrast to this, continues the tradition of speaking out against the patriarchal nature of Chicano society pioneered by writers like Anzaldúa. The strongest point of Cisneros’ largely sympathetic family saga—and the point that most marks a departure from Rivera’s glorification of the family—is her capacity to confront the contradictions and hypocrisies of the Chicano family through Lala’s story. What is most interesting about her reflection on this topic, moreover, is that Lala’s rebellion against sexist mores is intertwined with her gradual realization that family stories may, in fact, be fictions or highly mediated versions of the truth. John V. Knapp has noted that families are marked by themes “that are present in the preceding generation and are transmitted from one generation to the next through narratives, family stories, assumptions of ‘correct’ behavior, etc.,” and he adds that these themes can become family myths (Knapp 20). Lala, as the main narrator of *Caramelo*, proves adept at unravelling the different themes and myths that make up her family’s narrative. She is a highly self-conscious narrator who underlines the fact that she is about to reveal her family’s myths right from the beginning of the novel, as part 1 is preceded by the following disclaimer: “The truth, these stories

are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies” (Cisneros 1).

The opening section of *Caramelo* also introduces one of the key revelations in the novel: the fact that Inocencio had an illegitimate daughter called Candelaria with the family’s servant when he was a young man, long before he moved from Mexico to the United States and married Lala’s mother. This character’s lack of innocence is underlined by the irony of his name, and his behavior is contextualised by the further revelation that it is part of a long list of sexual indiscretions by the male members of his family. Lala’s formidable grandmother, Soledad, was also once a family servant and was only married to her much wealthier husband, Narciso, because his father, Eleuterio, demanded that his son face his responsibility when Soledad became pregnant (159). This intervention is decidedly hypocritical, as the Spanish heritage that the Reyes family is so proud of is marred by Eleuterio’s own lack of responsibility to the wife he abandoned before making a new life in Mexico. In fact, Eleuterio’s first marriage to a woman whose social standing outranked his own became a burden to him; the lineage he is so proud of in Mexico is not a reflection of his own social status, but a result of his first marriage, which did not last because of his sense of inferiority: “His first wife, a woman of exceptional memory, was especially adroit at reminding Eleuterio of his humble origin and his subsequent mediocrity. It was with no regret and only the clothes on his back that Eleuterio abandoned this wife, Seville, and that life without a life” (161). Eleuterio’s name, which comes from the Greek meaning “freedom,” is also seen to be ironic, as he takes decisive action to ensure his own freedom while insisting that his son face up to his responsibilities.

This catalogue of ironies is further compounded by the fact that when Lala, as a teenager, rebels against her father’s restrictive control over her by running away to Mexico with her boyfriend, she is in fact replicating the behavior of both her father and her male ancestors. This

rebellion is in turn inspired by the story of her Auntie Light Skin—the least conventional woman in Lala’s immediate family. The family’s reaction to Auntie Light Skin’s marriage to a divorced man mirrors Lala’s father’s harsh words to his daughter many years later, when she expresses a desire to leave home: “And so, I was married, but what good did that do me when your grandmother found out? ‘What, are you stupid or just pretending to be stupid? As long as his first wife is still alive, your marriage is just paper. You may think you are married, but in the eyes of God you’re nothing but a prostitute.’ Those words, they hurt me even now, Lalita” (271).

Despite his promise to disown his daughter, however, Lala’s father is so distraught when she disappears to Mexico that he is overcome with emotion when she returns home: “Father holds me in his arms and sobs on my shoulder. —I can’t, Father hiccups. —I can’t. Even take care of you. It’s all. My fault. I’m. To blame. For this. Disgrace” (395). While this heartfelt lament is undoubtedly genuine, it also suggests that Lala’s father may indeed share some of the blame for his daughter’s actions as she unconsciously emulates an experience of sexual rebellion not unlike his own youthful indiscretion. Moreover, the existence of a daughter whom he has never acknowledged casts doubt on his portrayal in the novel as a loving, devoted father.

The story of Candelaria, Inocencio’s secret daughter, also calls attention to the ways in which Cisneros links the family’s propensity for mythmaking to well-known Western fairytales. In part 1, Lala notes that Cinderella is her mother’s pet name for her. The experience of Soledad—who was cast out by her father after her mother’s death and his remarriage—also prefigures the Cinderella story involving Candelaria, though her situation is likened to a different fairytale: “It was like the fairy tale ‘The Snow Queen,’ a bit of evil glass no bigger than a sliver had entered into his eye and heart, a tender pain that hurt when he thought about his daughter” (95).

Like many of the other motifs in the story, the Cinderella symbol is multifaceted and shifts as the narrative progresses. Candelaria’s story

is also intertwined with the story of one of the most famous Mexican films of all time, Ismael Rodríguez's *Nosotros los pobres* (1948). As the Soledad tells Lala the story of the hardship she endured after being banished from the family home, Lala immediately sees the connection: "If this were a movie from Mexico's Golden Age of cinema, it would be black-and-white and no doubt a musical. Like *Nosotros los pobres*" (98). *Nosotros los pobres* stars the Mexican heartthrob Pedro Infante, to whom Lala's father is often compared (3). This film is an enduringly popular musical that romanticizes poverty and stresses the importance of family and community. Infante plays Pepe el Toro, whose niece has been abandoned by her irresponsible mother; she is, however, unaware of this harsh reality and thinks that Pepe is her father and that her mother is dead. This popular Mexican cultural reference is grafted onto the family history, again suggesting the permeability of stories told over the years, as well as the habits of their tellers to embellish them with other stories far removed from the reality of the real-life events.

Although throughout the novel Lala calls into question the stories she hears and exposes the myths created to replace uncomfortable truths, she too has inherited a propensity for mythmaking. When she is bullied at school for not looking Mexican enough, she defends herself by citing a family history involving Nefertiti and Andalusian gypsies, which is even more fantastic than the myth propagated by her grandmother, much to her mother's disgust: "You're just like your father, Mother says.—A born liar. Nothing but a bunch of liars, from his mother all the way back to the great-grand-something-or-other who said he was descended from the king of Spain. Look, the Reyes are nothing but *mitoter*os,³ and if they say they're not, they're lying" (353).

The novel ends with Lala's ultimate rebellion. As she dances with her father at her parents' anniversary celebration, he shares stories of his life, with the notable exception of the existence of her half-sister Candelaria. At the novel's conclusion, he urges her to keep this advice to herself and he especially stresses that it should not be spoken of outside the family circle, as the barbarians he calls Anglos would do:

“Don’t be talking such things like the barbarians, *mi vida*. To mention them makes our family look like *sinvergüenzas*, understand? You don’t want people to think we’re shameless, do you? Promise your papa you won’t talk these things, Lalita. Ever. Promise. I look into Father’s face, that face that is the same face as the Grandmother’s the same face as mine. —I promise, Father” (430).

Of course, the very existence of the novel is the negation of this promise. To return to the comparison between *Caramelo* and . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, this concluding sentence can be interpreted less as a personal betrayal and more as a reflection of the chasm between writers like Rivera and contemporary writers like Cisneros. In terms of the novel’s development, Lala’s broken promise signals her desire to end a cycle of mythmaking and secrets that has done a great deal of damage to her family. In terms of the text’s metanarrative, this exchange asserts the right of the Chicana writer to expose the negative aspects of Chicano family life, rather than concealing them out of a misguided sense of solidarity. Cisneros’ insistence on the centrality of mythmaking to the particular family story she recounts ultimately exposes the idea of the Chicano family as the bedrock of Chicano society as a myth. While the myths perpetrated by the fictional Chicano family at the heart of the novel and by the extended family that is Chicano society can be consoling and nurturing, they can also be dangerously repressive when imposed as an unquestionable truth.

Notes

1. “The house, the neighborhood and the struggle.” (Author translations throughout).
2. “Bad woman.”
3. “Mythmakers.”

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