
Sandra Cisneros and Her Trade of the Free Word

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In the same manner as shopping for fresh, traditional, Mexican food has become a relatively easy task in the US since the 1994 NAFTA agreement, we also find more availability of transnational literature and culture, an example of which is Sandra Cisneros' latest novel *Caramelo* which I consider international, transnational, and of a nature emergent from historiography.¹ This interactive/internet novel expands representation of the rebozo as a cultural icon. Also, a look at the interactive use of Mexico's popular culture icons in the United States illuminates their use as cultural accoutrements to the understanding of the many layers of culture Chicanos bring to mainstream America. Until recently Cormak McCarthy could write dialogues in Spanish relatively easily, but for Chicana authors it has been problematic to write and publish in Spanish. An indicator of post-NAFTA possibilities appeared in 2002, when Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo* emerged in the US market in Spanish and English simultaneously, selling 13,000 copies in the first six months in its translated Spanish edition, compared to Spanish texts in the '90s which "typically received initial printings of only 5,000 paperbacks" according to *Publishers Weekly* (Lopez 1). The story of both the publication (a success story) and that of the successful immigrants is simple: another young protagonist prototype of Chicano literature commenting in a Bildungsroman on her family and her culture, an imitational saga perhaps of the Esperanza story of *The House on Mango Street*, about which so much has been theorized. Or is it so simple? In fact, *Caramelo* is a groundbreaker in multiple manners: it is the first Chicana/o novel to appear in Spanish without the condition of first becoming a best-seller in English, as did Norma Cantú's *Canicula*, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* and *The House on Mango Street*. The Spanish edition even notes, "This book was published simultaneously in English and Spanish by Random House, Inc. 2002."

Caramelo parallels its exclusive agenda to that of other Chicanas, the notion of "subjectifying" the Chicana/o through its pages, providing an interactive, internet-ready, international book and demystifying the matriarchal figures in Chicana literature: the mother, grandmother, and aunts.² The narrative in *Caramelo* is a profound and timely literary study of the un-basted and unembroidered, of the

great unfinished rebozo of Mexican time in the United States. In conjunction with the agenda of other writers to solidify Chicana/o characters and dispel subjectivity stereotypes, Cisneros contributes to the project of globalizing Chicana literature, and historicizing Chicano/Mexicano culture. She brings to the American cultural menu a new set of popular culture icons, who have remained as “unidentified Mexican flying” musicians, artists, and dancers to mainstream America. Sandra Cisneros centralizes their nationalistic tendencies into an expansion of the mythic homeland for Chicanos: Aztlán. By doing this, the dialectic relationship between mainstream America and Chicana/o literature and culture is healthily stretched and culturally expanded.

This is a novel that might not have been read or bought so readily before the internet world prevailed in the US, and technology allowed for readers to document and patch their own places of ignorance regarding Mexican and Chicano popular culture. *Caramelo* has had a dialectic relationship with the Internet. It has expanded it, educated it, and re-directed it. Many of the websites about the Mexican pop-cult heroes and heroines mentioned in *Caramelo* have emerged because of *Caramelo*.³ Readers often frequent the Internet in order to understand the culturally rich undertones of the novel. A pantheon of stars has been rebirthed by Cisneros into the Mexican-American communities as well as the US mainstream. The rebirth is essential because it exemplifies the exotic trends that recur in waves in the US. The history the protagonist is so proud of in her narration of Aunty Light Skin’s life in Mexico City in the 1950s, as well as Chicano popular cultural life in Chicago and San Antonio earlier in the 1920s and ’30s and later in the 1980s when the novel ends, is underlined in the novel.

Is literature, in the same manner as many other commodified products, something that through NAFTA is developing uniformly but uniquely in English and Spanish, and also losing its original regional flavor? I believe Cisneros proves the opposite through her delivery of long lost cultural icons like Tongolele, Pedro Infante, Toña la Negra, María Antonieta Pons, and the recovery of the multiple meanings of the Elvis Presley movie *Fun in Acapulco* reread culturally for the Chicano community. This movie is also the incident that dates the contemporary stories in the book. Other icons are Tintan, the Mexican Pachuco (which denotes the connection between Mexicans in Mexico and those in the United States), Clavillazo (another comedian), the tragic gifted musician Agustín Lara, Lola Beltrán (the most multi-faceted of Mexican rancheras), hillbillies, and many more.

They are people who are border-crossers, transgressors, and multicultural and transnational symbols from a time in the 1950s and 1960s when difference was not a symbol of empowerment yet reigned in Mexico. Often, like the protagonists of

the book, these popular culture icons are exotified into “the other.” Cisneros takes the American mainstream and Latino readers into the world of the Non-Mexican “others” in the cosmopolitan world of Mexico City, a world still unknown to US culture. She introduces Pérez Prado, who imports the mambo into Mexico from his native Cuba, and Tongolele, the Eastern Washington woman who gives up her native rural US for Metropolitan Mexican nightlife, becoming whom I call the first popular “Cultural Chicana.” Tongolele, also known as Yolanda Montes, arrived from the US and utilized her hybridity to succeed in Mexico. Her father was Spanish/Swedish and her mother English/French (although her maternal grandmother is said to have had been part Tahitian). “Tongolele became a professional dancer at the age of 15 and, after an appearance in Tijuana, moved to Mexico City in late 1946. She worked in numerous Mexican films into the 1980s and is still active as a dancer and actress on TV and in live venues” (*Yolanda Montes*). She represents what Nestor García Canclini, author of *Culturas Híbridas*, would consider one of the obscured symbols of transnationalism, making herself thus by definition a mestiza acknowledging Mexican culture, “a cultural Chicana,” a non-biological Chicana, a person who lives an added hybrid profile to the Mexican cultural world of her choice.

Antonia Peregrino, better known as Toña La Negra, is perhaps Mexico’s quintessential Afro-Caribbean voice. Born into a family of musicians in Veracruz, Toña La Negra carried the flavor and spirit of Cuban music in Mexico. Her siblings, the Peregrino brothers, made a significant mark in the Afro-Cuban music scene in Mexico in the 1940s and ’50s, covering Cuban standards and creating original songs. Toña La Negra’s rise to fame began when she delved into the Agustín Lara repertoire. For much of her career, she became one of Lara’s most renowned and soulful interpreters.

María Antonieta Pons was born in Cuba. She met and married Juan Orol, who was visiting from Mexico; he directed her first film there, *Siboney* (1938). After several years of touring as dancers, they returned to Mexico, and Pons began her long career as a film star. She and Orol divorced in the mid-’40s, and Pons married Ramón Pereda, who guided her career until her final film, 1965’s *Caña brava*. She is one of the six women along with Ninón Sevilla, also mentioned in *Caramelo*, who popularized the “Rumbera” films into the ’50s. Her elaborate costumes gave her a position as one of the “tropical queens,” their style of dress popular in the 1950s all over the Western Hemisphere of the Americas, à la Carmen Miranda.

Another figure introduced to the American mainstream by Cisneros is Lola Beltrán. Lovingly hailed “la reina de la música ranchera” (the queen of ranchera music) in her native Mexico and popular throughout the world for 40 years, the multi-talented Lola Beltrán was truly a superstar of Mexican small town people. She

also sang at the Olympia in Paris later on in her life. Understandably, Lola Beltrán is thus, through the written word, intertextual in *Caramelo*, intertextual like Lucha Villa, another popular cultural icon mentioned by Cisneros in her poem “Mexican Hat Dance”: “the lady who sings with tears in her throat” (*My Wicked Wicked Ways* 9). In imparting these intertextual popular culture icons into her literature, Cisneros diagonally juxtaposes the importance of Lola Beltrán and Lucha Villa to Errol Flynn, who also returns from *My Wicked Wicked Ways* to become the American subjectivity of the father in *Caramelo*: “This is my father / See? He is young / He looks like Errol Flynn” (*My Wicked Wicked Ways* 23).

Tin Tan utilized the Chicano symbol of transgression that was the Zoot Suit in the '50s and '60s as his trademark and both catered to the Mexican people in the United States as well as advertised a Pachuco profile to the Mexican people as the “fashionable thing,” thereby eluding mainstream America’s judgment of the “Zoot suit” and undermining its judgmental penance to the Mexican eye. This was particularly important for Mexican Americans in the '50s because of having endured a war and the discrimination that came forth afterwards, culminating in the Zoot Suit riots and the inscribed understanding by an entire community of their being “The Other” in America, even after successfully defending their country in World War II.

The list is long, but yet another figure, Agustín Lara, is essential in *Caramelo*, because Cisneros begins and ends the book with his tragic music and he is one of the central figures induced into Cisneros’s popular culture agenda. By displaying the richness and eclecticism of Mexican culture, through a reliving of artistic icons, Cisneros facilitates the entry into an intimate layer of a Mexico/United States hungry for under-analyzed, historical popular culture. A Mexican composer, Lara began piano studies from an early age, and was seen to demonstrate considerable skills in improvisation. Because of his stormy romantic life, Lara is the perfect example of impossible nostalgic love, “a sufrido,” and the male counterpart to feminine stereotypes of women in the 1950s, a suffering musician who expresses in most of his work the metaphysical melancholy of displacement. He had been displaced by his culture, his family, and his lovers. His family never agreed to his bohemian style of artistic life as a composer or to his career, given the fact that he was born to an upper class Mexican family. He was also repeatedly abandoned by his various actress wives, including María Felix, for whom he writes the song “María Bonita” with which *Caramelo* begins. He is an unsettling icon, now a citizen of the mythic nostalgic homeland of Aztlán, where he joins Chicanos. According to Mexican writer and journalist Cristina Pacheco, who wrote the book *The Owners of the Night*, the

fact that the workers of the nights, “the others,” are also symbols of uniqueness and hailed as transporters of foreign culture into Mexico is not gratuitously exhorted.

It is curious to note that, like the author of *Caramelo*, most of the pop culture figures mentioned in the novel are cultural workers at various levels. This significant orientalized contribution by Cisneros records and underlines “the other” in Mexican popular culture, historically documenting trends of hybridity and difference in Mexican culture accepted and acceptable to Chicanos, the global citizens of the past and present, and thus, the pioneers of an understanding and exposure to cultural difference as exemplified and highlighted to mainstream America by Cisneros.

The novel *Caramelo* is divided into three parts, not announced or indexed anywhere. Part I of the novel, *Recuerdo de Acapulco*, consists of 20 chapters; Part II, *When I was Dirt*, 31; and the weighty Part III, *The Eagle and the Serpent, or My Mother and My Father*, 35—totaling 86 chapters and a *Pilón*, which is the “little bit extra” that merchants give their clients and which Cisneros in a culturally relevant and polite manner fits into our shopping baskets of letters. In subsequent paperback publications an Index appears. It is absent only in the hardback first printing, which might also indicate that the publisher was later attempting to “undiversify” Cisneros’ initial intention for mystery. This practice is not new or particular to Cisneros. It is however an extremely important divisional construction of the book because it creates an interconnected mystery for the reader. (Denise Chavez is another author who practices this technique of interior graphing divisions in *Face of an Angel* and *Loving Pedro Infante*.) This division is also important in that it de-individualizes the novel and makes all the parts of the book intrinsic parts of the various lives of the protagonists, none more or less important than the other, like a communal extended family. The first part, *Recuerdo de Acapulco*, is the opening to the familial saga that serves as the foundation of the importance of the non-nuclear family in the Mexican/Chicano communities. The second part, *When I was Dirt*, is significant because it returns to the origins of Lala; to the mother earth; to the indigenous discourse with allusions in the introductory paragraph of this section; to Coatlicue, pre-Colombian goddess and mother of Huixilopochtli, who is sweeping when she is inseminated as if by the holy spirit, like the Virgin Mary, but actually by a physical icon: a feather.

For a long time I believe my first moment of existence is when I jump over a broom. I remember a house. I remember sunlight through a window, sunlight with dust motes sparkling in the air, and someone sweeping with a corn broom. A pile of dust on the floor, and I jump over it. Feet jumping over a dust pile; that was when the world began.

When I was dirt is when these stories begin. Before my time. Here is how I heard or didn't hear them.... (89)

This second part of the novel is the her-story of the Awful Grandmother; this is significant because the Coatlicue entity is as complex as the protagonist's grandmother, as we can see in the *Diccionario de mitología y religión de Mesoamérica*:

"skirt of serpents" is one of the forms of the goddess mother that has merged or conformed itself into other goddesses. Its classic representation is an enormous sculpture in stone that is found at the National Museum of Anthropology [in Mexico City]. This monolith is a feminine monster with the serpent skirt, head shaped by two serpent heads, necklace made out of hands and hearts, hands and feet in the form of claws. Nonetheless, in some manuscripts she appears with her lips painted of rubber and a stain, also made up of rubber on her cheeks. She wears a cotton headdress with serpents, a white dress and, sometimes, a short skirt made up of conks called a "faldellín of stars." In one hand she holds a shield of perforated gold and in the other a broom. According to some myths, she appears as the wife of Mixcoatl instead of Chimalma and as the mother of Quetzalcoatl, even though her most important role is that of mother of Huchilopochtli. It is said that while Coatlicue was sweeping as penance on the hill of Coatepec all of a sudden a large feather fell from the sky; she put it away on her lap and because of it became pregnant. (Torres 42-43; my translation)

This second part is also the history that resurges occasionally from one of the most important Mexican cultural icons, the rebozo. Soledad's family of rebozo makers, Soledad being the Awful Grandmother, is then catapulted into a layered central space by Cisneros, alongside Celaya. In this part, we begin to understand the title of the book and realize that this material icon is a symbol for the four cultures that make up the protagonists in the novel; in fact, by including this rebozo as a protagonist, or shall we say the string that ties the novel together, Cisneros again inscribes, or "Naftas" (I use this as a verb), another Mexican cultural icon into mainstream consciousness. This part encapsulates in its body the Conquest, the Colonial Period, the Mexican Revolutionary period and Mexico in its current state of evolution, as well as the Mexican legacies that trail into the US.

The return to the mother earth of the title "When I was Dirt" opens the threshold, or liminal space, for the reader to enter into a time before the present, the return to the origins, that is, the ancestors represented by the abuela, daughter of the makers of a Pre-Columbian icon, the rebozo. The encounter of indigenous and Spanish is successfully underlined by narrating to the readers the story of Eleuterio, Narciso's father and, Lala's great-grandfather who opts for the union between an indigenous woman and his son by arguing that "we are not dogs." This strategy both humanizes and colonizes this material protagonist through colonial times and

the Mexican Revolution, both periods that make the rebozo central to the everyday life of a Mexican. What the unfinished rebozo represents is the cultural syncretism weaved into the family's story.

The third part of the book, titled "The Eagle and the Serpent: My Mother and Father," details the grandmother's experience in Chicago and San Antonio after leaving Mexico, her road to invisibility, and finally her death. It is the traditionally feminist part of the novel, which connects with the experience of women and aging, women and religion, women and sexuality, and which particularly weaves the strands of the ethnic rebozo into place. In the chapter "Mexican on Both Sides," Cisneros gives us a biblical definition of Mexican/Chicano:

A part of me wants to kick their ass. A part of me feels sorry for their stupid ignorant selves. Burt if you've never been farther than Nuevo Laredo, how the hell would you know what Mexicans are supposed to look like, right?

There are the green-eyed Mexicans. The rich blond Mexicans. The Mexicans with the faces of Arab sheiks. The Jewish Mexicans. The big-footed-as-a-German Mexicans. The leftover-French Mexicans. The *chaparrito* compact Mexicans. The Tarahumara tall-as-desert-saguaro Mexicans. The Mediterranean Mexicans. The Mexicans with Tunisian eyebrows. The *negrito* Mexicans of the double coasts. The Chinese Mexican. The curly-haired, freckled-faced, red-headed Mexicans. The Lebanese Mexicans. Look, I don't know what you're talking about when you say I don't look Mexican. I *am* Mexican. Even though I was born on the U.S. side of the border. (353)

We could say that *Caramelo*—the name of a shaded rebozo, of candy, a color, and even a proper name, that perhaps ends up at times being woven into the multiple meanings of the narrative—is a profound study of the un-basted and unembroidered, as aforementioned; of the great unfinished rebozo of Mexican time in the US, of unfinished subjectivity and identity, and the unfermented rebozo, like the protagonist rebozo of the novel. It is thereby feasible, through this harmoniously colorful unfinished rebozo that represents two kinds of eagles (in this third part of the novel), or keys that open the two worlds. Lala's parents would unlock the two worlds that shape the multiple meanings of culture with an inexistent, unfinished border of Mexico and the United States.

Mujeres del rebozo rojo (1995)

Who are we,
las mujeres del rebozo rojo,
who want to reach and stretch and spread
and grow beyond our limits
yawning, pulling up our heads, pushing out our lungs,

arching out our arms
resting only when in growth, transition, transformation
wanting only to be, and to become . . .
. . . To unfold our lives as if they were a rebozo
 revealing its inner colors,
 the richness of its texture,
 the strength of its weave,
 the history of its making.

Interestingly enough, by providing specific historical and popular culture celebrities, and cultural icons such as the rebozo or Mexican shawl which she introduced in *Woman Hollering Creek* with the short story “Eyes of Zapata,” Cisneros’ metaphor for multiple literary and cultural meanings is underlined. The rebozo, a shawl whose story Lala the protagonist tells, is in fact the motif that ties the entire novel into a package of creative non-fiction, a historical novel and a culturally rich demonstration of literature. The reader then is able to enter the novel at different sites depending upon his or her knowledge of Mexican/Chicano culture. The Caramelo does not only mean a shawl, or a candy, but a skin color, and even a name. Splitting meanings exonerates the reader from a homogeneous reading. Curiously enough the shawl continues to grow in its multiple subjectivities into a personified object that speaks and possesses its own language and additional new qualities. This passage from “Rebozos: Our Cultural Blankets” in *Voces* clarifies the issue:

But the rebozo is much more than this, an at least five hundred year old icon is a symbol of resistance and inscription of a culture into various others. It is a boundary of one’s body; it is a space uncrossed by others. A rebozo has been, and to some Chicanas/Mexicans or their immediate relatives continues to be, one or more of these: a belt, a coat, an apron, a garment, a cover, a shield, a purse, a pre-Columbian slinky, an insignia, a tie from mother to grandmother, a sign of womanhood, a shelter, a hiding place, a wheel barrel, a roof, an altar, a clothesline, a bandage, a string, a song, a kerchief, a tablecloth, an adornment, a tool. In our anthropological cultural quest we find that it is the umbilical chord with which every generation has been tied even to pre-Columbian times. Most importantly it reminds us of the mother image that many of us carry in our hearts with tenderness. But, because this is the most obvious use of a rebozo as a cradle for culture, Chicana/Mexicana culture, and womanhood it sometimes reminds us of the stereotype of indigenous woman/mother/rebozo. (Gutiérrez y Muhs 138)

Cisneros revives her initial intent in “Eyes of Zapata” (the short story in *Woman Hollering Creek* where she deconstructs the hero and first mentions the rebozo) now again in *Caramelo* and makes the rebozo the element or ingredient that masterfully and metaphorically ties the story into a unique literary weave.

Women across the republic, rich or poor, plain or beautiful, ancient or young, in the times of my Grandmother all owned rebozos—the ones real Chinese silk sold for prices so precious one asked for them as dowry and took them to the grave as one's burial shroud, as well as the cheap everyday made of cotton and bought at the market. Silk rebozos worn with the best dress-de-gala, as they say. Cotton rebozos to carry a child, or to shoo away the flies. Devout rebozos to cover one's head with when entering church. Showy rebozos twisted and knotted in the hair with flowers and silver hair ornaments. The oldest, softest rebozo worn to bed, a rebozo as cradle, as umbrella or parasol, as basket when going to market or modestly covering the blue-veined breast-giving suck. (93-94)

Again in this passage we notice the interactive opportunity for the Grandmother to interject her voice from the memory of the protagonist Lala into the text of the book, exemplified in this continuing section that personifies the rebozo as we shall see later; but more importantly the rebozo has an omnipresent protective aura that allows Soledad, the orphaned Awful Grandmother to be cradled and embraced by the significance of what is missing, as important as the significance of what it represents:

It is only right, then, that she should have been a knotter of fringe as well, but when Soledad was still too little to braid her own hair, her mother died and left her without the language of knots and rosettes, of silk and artisela, of cotton and ikat-dyed secrets. There was no mother to take her hands and pass them over a dry snakeskin so her fingers would remember the patterns of diamonds. When Guillermina departed from this world into that, she left behind an unfinished rebozo, the design so complex no other woman was able to finish without undoing the threads and starting over.... (94)

The rebozo in *Caramelo* is a continuation of Cisneros' cultural iconic agenda. She establishes the rebozo as a cultural marker that is a didactic cultural tool as well as a symbolic nationalist item. She wraps it over her like the Niños Heroes, child heroes who defended the Mexican flag by dying wrapped in it during the French invasion. "Soledad has wrapped herself in her rebozo caramelo as if she were one of the Niños Heroes of Chapultepec wrapped in the Mexican flag" (190). In addition to all the uses mentioned by Gutiérrez y Muhs in "Rebozos: Our Cultural Blankets," Cisneros expands the meaning of rebozos in *Caramelo*. The rebozo caramelo, which is already dappled, acquires new mottled cultural flavors. It is a weapon, a personified voice, an icon of nationalism, and a cover for her dead mother.

Even with half its fringe hanging unbraided like mermaid's hair, it was an exquisite rebozo of five tiras, the cloth of a beautiful blend of toffee, licorice, and vanilla stripes flecked with black and white, which is why they call this design a caramelo. The shawl was slippery-soft, of an excellent quality and weight, with astonishing

fringe work resembling a cascade of fireworks on a field of sunflowers, but completely unsellable because of the unfinished rapacejo. Eventually it was forgotten, and Soledad was allowed to claim it as a plaything. (94)

The rebozo has a language of its own which was not fully brought to bloom by any other Chicana author previously and which on its own is placed under the category of hybrid icon that legitimizes Mexican female identity from Pre-Columbian times to the present.

The rebozo in the following quotation nurses the orphan emotionally through her solitude and gives her a philosophical meaning and a linguistic equivalent through its mere existence because of what tradition represents to Chicanas and Mexicanas:

Because she didn't know what else to do, Soledad chewed on the fringe of her rebozo. Oh, if only her mother were alive. She could have told her how to speak with her rebozo. How, for example, if a woman dips the fringe of her rebozo at the fountain when fetching water, this means,—I am thinking of you. Or, how if she gathers her rebozo like a basket, and walks in front of the one she loves and accidentally lets the contents fall, if an orange and a piece of sugarcane tumble out, that means,—Yes, I accept you as my novio. Or if a woman allows a man to take up the left end of her rebozo, she is saying,—I agree to run away with you. How in some parts of Mexico, when the rebozo is worn with the two tips over her back, crossed over her head, she is telling the world,—I am a widow. If she allows it to fall loose to her feet,—I am a woman of the street and my love must be paid for with coins. Or knotted at the ends,—I wish to marry. And when she does marry, how her mother would place a pale blue rebozo on her head, meaning,—This daughter of mine is a virgin, I can vouch for it. But if she had her lady friend do it for her in her name, this meant,—Unused merchandise, well, who can say? Or perhaps in her old age she might instruct a daughter,—Now, don't forget, when I'm dead and my body is wrapped in my rebozos, it's the blue one on top, the black one beneath, because that's how it's done, my girl. But who was there to interpret the language of the rebozo to Soledad? (105)

The rebozo becomes the connector of nationalism, language, and home. In *Caramelo*, Aztlán the Chicano/Mexicano homeland becomes an interconnected rebozo of color and multi-sensibility, a rug that wipes messy Chicano identities of diverse social classes. It cauterizes the wound of immigration, migration, and the spillover of pain and loss of culture in the second and third generations—Nisei, Sansei—opening the cultural borders. It comforts Chicanos about the possible past and the possible future, independent of “Awful relatives and long lost families.” The caramelo rebozo inspires the intertwined sensitivities about giving textile and tradition a textual meaning, a language of mending and searches, understandings and interpretations.⁴ Because “rebozar” also means “to muffle up” we can understand

the parallels of Mexicana/Chicana subjectivity. They who are to be muffled up give multiple meanings to the instrument of their muffling, both in everyday practical Mexican life and in Chicana intellectual circles. The caramelo rebozo becomes the personified voice of the past through one of the main protagonists, the Awful Grandmother. Moreover, its evolving transformation allows for the expansion of subjectivity. "In the belly button of the house, the Awful Grandmother tossing her black rebozo de bolita criss-cross around her breasts, like a soldadera's bandoleers. The big black X at the map's end" (26). The Awful Grandmother is the X at the end of the road that marks Mexico City; the rebozo represents the unfulfilled/incomplete life of the Awful Grandmother and the possible future life of Celaya, a historical mantelpiece of her fire. At the end of the road, Celaya understands that she and the Grandmother are very similar, moreover expressing the circularity of the novel, in part through the metaphor of the rebozo: "Maybe it's my job to separate the strands and knot the words together for everyone who can't say them, and make it all right in the end" (428). This was in part through the realization that her Grandmother was not so unlike her:

It hits me at once, the terrible truth of it. I am the Awful Grandmother. For love of Father, I'd kill anyone who came near him to hurt him or make him sad. I've turned into her. And I see inside her heart, the Grandmother, who had been betrayed so many times she only loves her son. He loves her. And I love him. I have to find room inside my heart for her as well, because she holds him inside her heart like when she held him inside her womb, the clapper inside a bell. One can't be reached without touching the other. Him inside her, me inside him, like Chinese boxes, like Russian dolls, like an ocean full of waves, like the braided threads of a rebozo. When I die then you'll realize how much I love you. And we are all, like it or not, one and the same. (424-425)

In the manner with which Denise Chávez makes Pedro Infante, the most popular Mexican actor/singer of the 20th century, American, having him as a central character in her novel titled *Loving Pedro Infante*, Sandra Cisneros delivers a long list of unknown performers, singers, actors, and dancers to the American mainstream menu of culture in her novel *Caramelo*. By giving preference to Churbruzco Azteca actors as opposed to Hollywood ones, Cisneros places the Mexican subjectivity of her character Celaya at the level of a newly formulated polycentric ladder of importance. The cultural centers of the protagonist are multiple. She does not only possess Errol Flynn or Clark Gable but many other non-classical tap-dancing "Fred Astaires" who could never equal the arbitrarily ingenious performances of Mexico's Clavillazo and Tin Tan.

And yet, while Cisneros privileges globalization, by globalizing Chicana/o protagonists she also brings in Mexican subjectivities into the pot of what is American, thereby expanding Aztlán into various directions and discourses, as well as continents. Celaya's grandfather, after all, is from Spain, and the novel enjoyed great sales in Spain where Sandra Cisneros is read almost immediately after publication. The Chicano then, by association, traverses languages, stages, cultures, and systems of mainstreaming values where pop culture, past and present, is inscribed and differential articulations of racialized notions of skin color and cultural icons are exhibited. The values and history of Chicanos are highlighted in the informed Glossary the author creates at the end of the book in order to explain the history of her protagonists, highlighting what is naturally central to the author: the death of María Felix, Frida Kahlo, issues of immigration, invasions by the US. The innovative literary technique of the historical glossary is of course to situate the novel within a world of history as opposed to the indescribable mythic homeland of Aztlán. By materializing the world with rebozos and iconic successful human beings of Chicana/o culture and life (and circling back to the original regionalized meaning of Aztlán, which referred to the Southwest region of the United States), Cisneros erases, as NAFTA has done, the elastic borderline that delimits as well as expands the horizons for Latinos. ✱

Notes

¹ "The Free Word" is of course playing upon a NAFTA phrase for part of the contemporary exchange between México and the US; here I am referring to the availability of the novel both in English and Spanish simultaneously and in both countries.

² Just as Asian-American theorist Triaize Yamamoto utilizes "mask" as a verb in *Making Selves, Making Subjects* to stress the action and process of the entire project she was undertaking, I utilize "subject" as a verb: not "to subject," but "to subjectify," or "subjectifying." If subjectivity is constantly being reconstituted in agency and power, Chicana writers such as Cantú use novelistic discourse to intervene in the transformation of received subjectivities. See also Gloria Anzaldúa's *Making Face, Making Soul*, for a similar process.

³ This exciting representation of the dialectic relationship between *Caramelo* and the Internet and can be seen through the amazing growth and the popularization of websites about Mexico's popular culture icons since the publication of *Caramelo*. Web pages dedicated to Mexico's popular culture icons have increased. I include the following numerical results from an Internet search about some popular culture icons inherent in the novel: Tongolele, 13,500 results; Tin Tan, 6,760 results; Lola Beltrán, 44,300 results; Toña La Negra, 15,100 results; María Antonieta Pons, 5,370 results. The musician whose songs start and conclude the book, Agustín Lara, has a tremendous 276,000 web pages dedicated to him.

⁴ Please also see discussions by Agosin on *The Arpilleras* and Bettina Aptheker. According to Schevill, Berlo, and Dwyer:

The rebozo is a multi-functional long shawl worn by women in Mexico. The Spanish word “rebozar” means “to muffle up.” The rebozo serves not only to cover the head or to cross over the breasts for adornment. It is also a temporary cradle for children of the poor, a kerchief with which women carry vegetables to the market, a cover for the infant who tranquilly sleeps by his working mother. It covers a pot of tamales for sale on a street corner. Its fringe, twisted on the head, becomes a stand for a basket of fruit. While the Spanish rebozo is the size of a handkerchief, the Mexican rebozo varies in width from twenty-four to thirty-four inches and in length, approximately three-quarters is woven and the remainder is fringe, usually elaborately worked in one or a combination of half hitching overhand knotting, or finger weaving. The yarn, the color and design of the weaving, the style and technique of fringe finishing, and the manner in which the rebozo is worn communicate significant information. These features serve to indicate where the rebozo was made and the probable status and home of the wearer.

Currently, there are four principal types of rebozos:

1. wool or cotton rebozos in solid colors or stripes, not ikat dyed, woven on a back strap loom in home or village;
2. rebozos similar in category 1 produced on a treadle loom;
3. rebozos similar in category 1 produced on a power loom;
4. rebozos that are ikat dyed, using commercial cotton, produced on a treadle or back strap loom.

The cotton used in type 4 is commercially spun, ranging in number from the coarsest, #80 to the finest, @200. The finer grades are sometimes called de bolita, perhaps referring to the packaging in balls. (310-311)

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