



**T E X A S A & M I N T E R N A T I O N A L U N I V E R S I T Y**

**A Member of Texas A&M University System**

**Department of Humanities**

**Review of the Ph. D. dissertation, *20<sup>th</sup>-Century Chicana Literature as Symbolic Habitus*, submitted by Tomasz Jerzy Brenet to the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures at the University of Silesia**

It is my pleasure to write the following review of Mr. Brenet's dissertation, which I have read with great interest. I would like to begin by stating that my overall evaluation of the project is quite positive, and I think that it meets the requirements for approval as part of the requirements of a Ph. D. degree, even if there are some aspects in the dissertation that might benefit from some further editorial work, as well as some changes and additions to its contents, which I will point out in the course of my evaluation. I will organize the review in the following epigraphs:

1. Project structure and methodology
2. Selection and analysis of the corpus
3. Bibliographical sources
4. Style and language
5. Suggested revisions
6. Overall assessment

## **1/ Project structure and methodology**

The dissertation is divided into three major sections, “In Search of a Theory,” “In Search of a Habitus,” and “Literature as a Symbolic Habitus,” a tripartite structure that I find very effective in presenting the materials in a clear and orderly fashion. The first section provides the theoretical foundations of the research project and formulates the methodological strategy for the textual analysis of the corpus. The second section provides a detailed introduction to the Mexican-American population in the United States (oftentimes referred to as the Chicano/a community), its history and its current status within the complex ethnic texture of the nation, with special attention to the past and present circumstances of Mexican-American women as a “minority within a minority”. The third section constitutes the analysis of the corpus, a selection of literary works by Ana Castillo, one of the major voices in the Mexican-American female literary tradition.

The method adopted by the author combines tools from three main disciplines, Sociology, History, and Literary Studies. In this respect, I will note the proximity of such a methodological strategy to what in the Anglo-American academia is known as Cultural Studies, a field characterized by its interdisciplinary and materialist strategies in the study of cultural production. While its viability may be open to discussion, and some scholars may even deem such methodology as unsuitable for the study of literature, I find it not only acceptable, but also recommendable to the research in ethnic literary studies, for the category “ethnic” itself is a cultural product, as the author of the present project proves beyond doubt.

The second part of this initial chapter provides some insights into both Postcolonialism and Feminism, two critical discourses that provide the toolbox that the author will use for the textual analysis of the corpus. Both Postcolonial and Feminist theories are pertinent to the study of Ana Castillo in her double condition of Chicana and female, and thus deserve some specific attention in the project. Obviously, a full account of these theories would exceed the scope of the dissertation. However, I recommend the inclusion of two authors whose contributions seem to me especially appropriate for the

project. One is Gayatri Spivak, whose seminal work has shed light on the matrix of subalternity and female subjugation as the basis for the position assigned by Eurocentric discourse to colonized societies, especially women. The other is Gloria Anzaldúa, whose notion of the New Mestiza I find most relevant to the study of Ana Castillo. While Anzaldúa is quite present, implicitly and explicitly, in the dissertation, I think some mention of her main ideas in this section is advisable. Spivak's ideas, on the other hand, would greatly contribute to the theoretical framework and the methodology of the project. I think these inclusions, which do not need to be lengthy, would round up the section nicely.

## **2/ Selection and analysis of the corpus**

One of the most relevant achievements of the dissertation under review is the comprehensive study of the specificities of the Mexican-American minority within the demographic and cultural composite of the United States. Although frequently assimilated into the larger category of Hispanics, the Mexican-American experience is in many senses distinct from that of the other groups traditionally classified under the same rubric, whose idiosyncratic individualities are obliterated as their group dissolves into the indeterminacy of the label "Hispanic". Such category vaguely grants cohesion to the whole through the supposed sharing of a common language, Spanish, which in turn becomes a feature for racial distinction, independently of whether the individuals actually speak, or even understand, the language. Columbians, Argentinians, Dominicans, Chileans, etc., see themselves deprived of their uniqueness as a group, of their histories and cultural heritages, and diluted into the general aggregate labelled Spanish or Hispanic. Mexican-Americans, however, resist such conceptual and political categorization, and their resistance to assimilation and effacement openly defies the very architecture of a social system founded on the division between mainstream and minority and its multiple derivatives (white/colored, master/subaltern, citizen/immigrant, etc.).

In this respect, the author of this project manages to provide a very detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the Mexican-American experience, both historically and in the present. It is worth mentioning, for example, that many Mexican-Americans never migrated into US territory, but were literally abducted into a new nation and a new culture by the imperialist annexation of their ancestral lands. Down here on the banks of the Río Grande where I am writing these lines, I frequently hear my neighbors claim that their families never crossed the frontier, but the frontier crossed them over. Individuals and communities who went to bed one night as Mexican citizens, woke up the following morning as US subjects, without the benefits of actual citizenship in the invading nation.

A further merit of the project is the accurate diagnosis of the double process of discrimination to which Mexican-American females have been historically subjected to. Furthermore, the project also identifies the foundations of the Chicana phenomenon as a movement within the Chicanismo that seeks to improve the specific conditions of women, while sharing the common goal of promoting the advancement of the Mexican-American community at large. As noted earlier, the project would gain in precision with a more detailed account of Gloria Anzaldúa's theoretical and critical contributions to our understanding of the Chicana movement. Again, this should not require a lengthy addition, but just a few paragraphs to complement what is already stated.

Ana Castillo's fiction is fertile ground for the study of Chicana consciousness and aesthetics, but the reach of her literary (and critical) voice transcends ethnicity, class, and gender and becomes a sustained meditation on the human condition at large, and particularly of the female condition in a world subjected to the patriarchal rule of father and emperor. The dissertation under review offers a wealth of insights into the fictional universe that Castillo brings to life in her novels, and undertakes a detailed analysis of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and *So Far from God*. The selection of these two specific novels from Castillo's oeuvre as the corpus for analysis is, in my opinion, appropriate, for they have both reached international recognition and unanimously considered as summits

of Chicana literature. I would encourage the author to include a third text in the corpus in order to complement and expand the analysis of Castillo's literary voice, perhaps *Peel My Love like an Onion*, or the more recent *The Guardians*. I make this recommendation with a future book derived from the dissertation in mind, and not as a critique of the project in its current form, which meets and even surpasses the requirements and expectations of a doctoral dissertation.

### **3/ Bibliographical sources**

The revision of both the primary and secondary sources of the project reveals a sustained and thorough effort on the part of the author to compile all the materials pertinent to the study. While a full coverage is nearly impossible, the dissertation provides a very comprehensive bibliographical guide for future researchers. I have pointed out before the absence of Gayatri Spivak in the repertoire, but this is a minor lacuna in an otherwise impressive collection of sources. This, in turn, reveals the author's rigorous and minute effort to anchor the project in a well-documented scholarly research, which is in my opinion the most important requirement for a dissertation.

### **4/ Style and language**

I want to underscore the high quality of the academic prose, the clear and precise language and the scarcity of typos in the dissertation. The author manages to put forward his arguments quite convincingly by means of unsophisticated diction that is easy to follow, avoiding the convoluted lingo we often find in academic writing. Obviously, like all manuscripts, the dissertation will benefit from further editorial revisions, especially with the goal of publication in mind.

### **5/ Suggested revisions**

Fully aware that a Ph.D. dissertation, as a rule, is a stub for a future monograph rather than its draft, and that the poetics of the genre of the doctoral thesis differs from that of

an academic book, I would like to suggest a few relatively simple steps that could help the Author improve his manuscript.

- a) I would recommend the revision of the title of the future monograph to more accurately reflect the structure of the argument, which stresses the disparity between the actual habitus conditioning the Chicana reality and its projected, literary counterpart (“a symbolic habitus,” as the Author calls it), manifest in engaged texts by Chicana writers.
- b) I believe that certain theoretical passages, only indirectly relevant to the general methodological apparatus of the thesis, might be relegated to the footnotes, which could improve the flow of the argumentation. Likewise, the elimination of repetitive information (especially in the sections addressing the issues of the Chicana identity) might contribute to the central argument’s cohesion.
- c) The argument would benefit from the inclusion of references to more recent debates concerning Chicana feminism as a unique phenomenon in the multifaceted history of the evolution of feminist thought, which could provide good ground for a more solid recapitulation of the relations between the conceptual frameworks of the major disciplines upon whose findings the argument of the dissertation relies.
- d) The connection between the theoretical and historical sections of the dissertation, and its analytical part might perhaps be better emphasized by means of more direct application of the concept of the “symbolic habitus” (as opposed to the term “habitus” used without qualifications) to the interpretations of the texts selected.

## **6/ Overall assessment**

I find the dissertation under review satisfactory in terms of originality, methodological rigor, and overall coherence, and recommend its approval. By returning to the concept of the habitus and re-working it, the Author draws the reader’s attention to the potential of

optics alternative to those offered by approaches rooted in non-Chicana methodologies, i.e. methodologies claiming general applicability. Thereby, in my opinion, Tomasz Brenet succeeds in his effort to demonstrate that a well-known, yet no longer fashionable literary-sociological conceptual framework may be capable of doing justice to the uniqueness of the cultural conditioning of the Chicana experience today, empowering the Chicana voices themselves. Therefore, while I have pointed out in my review some minor aspects of the project that could be improved, and made some suggestions for future action in order to turn the dissertation into a monograph ready for publication, I find the dissertation fully acceptable as is, and therefore endorse its acceptance for oral defense without reservation. I will be most happy to expand on any aspect of this review upon request.

Professionally yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Manuel Broncano". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Dr. Manuel Broncano  
Regents Professor of English  
Former Department Chair  
Director of English, Spanish  
And Translation Programs  
manuel.broncano@tamiu.edu