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Shadow Men and Real Women: Shifting the Paradigms of the Chicana/o Family in Cherríe Moraga's *Shadow of a Man* and Josefina López's *Real Women Have Curves*

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The revolutionary promise of a theatre of liberation lies in the embodied rendering of our prisons and, in the act, our release from them.¹

In her essay, 'Only Daughter', Sandra Cisneros describes how being the only girl in a Mexican-American family with six brothers was the catalyst that drove her to become a writer. Ironically, because her father believed that the only real goal for women to achieve was to marry, he was supportive of her decision to study literature at university, as 'it meant it didn't matter if I majored in something silly like English. After all, I'd find a nice professional eventually who might marry me, right?'² Although recounted in her typically humorous style, Cisneros' essay encapsulates the frustration of Chicana writers who are constrained by the traditional expectations of their families and whose ambitions are relegated to marriage and motherhood.

Examples such as that given by Cisneros abound in literature by early Chicano writers. Tomás Rivera, whose acclaimed novel *... y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971) is frequently compared to Cisneros' *Bildungsroman* *The*

1 Cherríe Moraga, 'An Irrevocable Promise: Staging the Story Xicana', in her *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010*, illustrations by Celia Herrera Rodríguez (Durham, NC/London: Duke U. P., 2011), 34–48 (p. 40).

2 Sandra Cisneros, 'Only Daughter', in her *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2016), 91–96 (p. 92).

House on Mango Street (1983), has repeatedly asserted the importance of the family to Chicana/o culture. Reflecting on his early reading and love of literature, Rivera expresses his anguish at discovering that the Chicano family, which he equates with the wider community, was not represented in the texts that he cherished: 'to realize that one's own family group or clan is not represented in literature is a serious and saddening realization'.³ In the same essay, he goes on to explain that '*La casa* is to me the most beautiful word in the Spanish language. It evokes the constant refuge, the constant father, the constant mother'.⁴ Rivera is certainly correct that the Chicana/o family, and indeed Chicana/o life, had not been represented in North American literature prior to the 1970s, and he and other writers of his era played an important role in re-inscribing Chicana/o life into North American literature. However, Rivera's view of the family is idealistic if not romanticized. Although the family at the centre of his best-known work undoubtedly provides much-needed comfort and support to the young male protagonist, the fact that the collective is consistently privileged over the individual in the novel, as has been attested by many critics,⁵ means that certain characters are sidelined or relegated to subordinate roles. This is particularly true of female characters, who mainly appear as self-sacrificing mothers or as child-like figures entirely dependent on men. As Patricia de la Fuente observes:

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.⁶

It is important to note that Rivera does acknowledge the many challenges that the family faces. These include intergenerational differences, such as the unnamed protagonist's rebellion against certain family traditions, especially blind faith in religion, whether pre-Columbian or Catholic rituals. This unquestioning belief is largely attributed to the protagonist's mother, however.

At the outset of the novel, the reader learns that the boy drinks the water that his mother leaves every night as an offering to the spirits so that she will

3 Tomás Rivera, 'Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living', *Books Abroad*, 49:3 (1975) 439–52 (p. 439).

4 Rivera, 'Chicano Literature', 441.

5 See, for example, Manuel Martín-Rodríguez, *Life in Search of Readers: Reading (in) Chicano/a Literature* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2003), 26.

6 Patricia de la Fuente, 'Invisible Women in the Narrative of Tomás Rivera', in *International Studies in Honor of Tomás Rivera*, ed. Julián Olivares (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1986), 81–90 (p. 82) (previously published as a Special Issue of *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, 13:3–4 [1985]).

not be disappointed that the spirits did not visit their home.⁷ Her son's desire to protect her from the truth reverses the roles of parent and child, thus infantilizing her. Similarly, another scene involving the arrest of a mother, who is overwhelmed by agoraphobia in a crowded store and forgets to pay for Christmas gifts for her children, is resolved by her husband. He assures her that he will bring her whatever she needs so that she will not have to leave the home.⁸ This less than satisfactory response to her traumatic experience relegates her to a child-like role, as she cannot venture out in the world to provide for her children as he does. As Manuel Luis Martínez points out, while in other episodes of the novel Rivera deftly critiques the lack of mobility imposed on the Chicana/o characters by the dominant Anglo-American culture, here the woman's mobility is as much proscribed by the family's patriarch as by mainstream society.⁹ Ultimately, moreover, for all its stylistic and thematic innovation, *... y no se lo tragó la tierra* transposes the traditional *Bildungsroman* to a Chicana/o setting, with the inevitable conclusion that the hero learns that the way to resolve his doubts about his family is to embrace them and abandon his questioning, thereby becoming a functioning member of society. Thus, at the novel's conclusion, he joyfully re-joins his family and resolves to act as part of this community rather than insist on his individualism.¹⁰

A precursor to *... y no se lo tragó la tierra*, José Antonio Villareal's 1959 *Pocho*, is strikingly similar to Rivera's work in its glorification of the nuclear family. As in Rivera's novel, *Pocho* portrays the racism and marginalization experienced by Chicana/os because of prejudice on the part of Anglo-American characters, but the family provides a constant source of support and comfort for the young protagonist, Richard:

Richard's most enjoyable moments were those spent in the company of his father. He loved his mother. She was always there when he needed her, and her arms and her songs were warmth and comfort and security, but with his father it was a different thing, because pleasure is far different from security.¹¹

Richard Vasquez's 1970 novel *Chicano*, which goes further than either Rivera's or Villareal's novels in denouncing the systemic racism and

7 Tomás Rivera, *... y no se lo tragó la tierra/ ... and the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, trans. Evangelina Vigil-Piñón (St Louis: Turtleback Books, 2015), 9.

8 Rivera, *... y no se lo tragó la tierra*, trans. Vigil-Piñón, 58.

9 Manuel Luis Martínez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 308–09.

10 Rivera, *... y no se lo tragó la tierra*, trans. Vigil-Piñón, 75.

11 José Antonio Villareal, *Pocho* (New York: Anchor Books 1989 [1st ed. New York: Doubleday, 1959]), 42.

marginalization faced by Chicana/os, presents the family in a less idealistic light. The drinking and irresponsibility of a series of patriarchs leads to the breakdown of their families, yet the idea that the nuclear family is a structure whose preservation is key to the happiness and comfort of its members persists. One striking example, where once again the female characters are more notable for their support of the family than in their own right, comes after patriarch Hector Sandoval has died of alcoholism and his daughters have become so disillusioned with their lack of prospects that they turn to prostitution. Neftali, their brother, none the less clings to the dream of having a perfect family. The solution, he believes, is to move to a Mexican settlement and find a young girl,

[...] virginal beyond belief, who wanted, as he did, nothing more than to start a close-knit family [...] eager for the steady home life, wherein he could cultivate the outside relationships he desired, where he could have good family friends over every night, and have guitar music and enough to eat for all, and live where his children would never know the stinging poverty he had grown up with or the lashing temptations that had torn his family apart here in the *barrio bajo*.¹²

Neftali's world-weary and utterly cynical sisters, having 'listened, without taking offense as he talked of the pure girl he wanted, the family, how he would teach his children what things really mattered', gift him the money he needs to go to a new town and start his family.¹³ The reification of the family and the subjugation of women within the family structure meant that there was a great deal of work to be done by subsequent generations of Chicana authors to complicate the portrayal of the family by Rivera and other male writers. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the family has been a central theme of Chicana writers, as for women the family has often been less a refuge than a place of containment, drudgery and even violence. Manuel Martín-Rodríguez argues that

Chicana authors have been interested in expanding the spaces in which female characters have appeared, and often this has implied writing the author and/or her readers into the texts as well, either explicitly or implicitly, in order to create a novel literary space for women.¹⁴

This observation is particularly apt when applied to the works on which this article trains its focus: the plays *Shadow of a Man*, by Cherríe Moraga, and *Real Women Have Curves* by Josefina López, both written in 1990, and the

12 Richard Vasquez, *Chicano: A Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1970), 61.

13 Vasquez, *Chicano*, 65.

14 Martín-Rodríguez, *Life in Search of Readers*, 72.

film based on López's work, directed by Patricia Cardoso and released in 2002.¹⁵ Not only do these texts re-write the Chicana/o family narrative, but they feature young protagonists whose rebellion against their family's traditions serves as a map for a new generation of female readers with which to fashion their own unique identities.

As Michelle Habell-Pallán rightly observes, Moraga was at the forefront of a wave of Chicana writers who, particularly from the 1980s and 1990s,

[...] openly criticized both nationalist concepts of identity and asymmetrical gender relations that constituted the organization of the movement, critiques in which feminist and lesbian/gay concerns were clearly articulated.¹⁶

A prolific playwright, Moraga has also produced the much-cited collections of essays *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (1983) and *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000–2010* (2011), as well as co-editing numerous anthologies including *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1983) and *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (1983).¹⁷ Josefina López, also a key figure in Chicana literature, wrote her first play, *Simply María, or The American Dream*, a work that explores the tensions between Mexican patriarchal culture and the American Dream, in 1988 at the age of seventeen.¹⁸ The same theme is also central to her best-known work, the play *Real Women Have Curves*, which was hugely successful.¹⁹ When the film adaptation of the play premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2002, it won the Special Jury Prize for Dramatic Category and the Audience Award.²⁰ The film was also

15 Cherríe Moraga, *Shadow of a Man*, in *Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women*, ed. Linda Feyder (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1994), 9–51; Josefina López, *Real Women Have Curves* (Woodstock: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1996); *Real Women Have Curves*, dir. Patricia Cardoso, DVD (USA: HBO Independent Productions/LaVoo Productions and Newmarket Films, 2003). Subsequent references to the plays by Cherríe Moraga and Josefina López are to these editions.

16 Michelle Habell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: New York U. P., 2005), 87.

17 For further information on Moraga's work, see <<http://www.cherriemoraga.com/>> (accessed 4 December 2020). Ellen McCracken has noted her influence on other Chicana writers in 'From Chapbooks to *Chica Lit*', in *International Perspectives on Chicana/o Studies: 'This World is My Place'*, ed. Catherine Leen & Niamh Thornton (New York: Routledge, 2014), 11–24 (p. 13).

18 Josefina López, *Simply María, or The American Dream*, in *Shattering the Myth*, ed. Feyder, 113–43.

19 Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2000), 126.

20 Scott L. Baugh, *Latino American Cinema: An Encyclopedia of Movies, Stars, Concepts and Trends* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Books, 2012), 84.

a commercial success, earning almost \$6 million at the box office, double its budget.²¹ The play and the film have been constantly referenced in debates about migration and alternative representations of the Latina body since their respective debuts, and *Real Women Have Curves* has attracted a notable amount of critical analysis.²²

Writing in 2012, Francisco Lomelí acknowledges that Moraga is part of a ground-breaking group of female writers who emerged in the 1970s to create a new Chicana literature, which in turn paved the way for López's generation:

Chicana authors managed to propagate a discourse and a subjectivity that opened up new avenues of expressing and representing women within society in general and with respect to other women, especially other Latinas, in particular. The potential for recovering untold stories of women's lives became infinite. At the same time, this generation redirected their attention toward overcoming restrictive notions of Chicana/o culture through a femiocentric perspective, especially one shaped by a Chicana viewpoint.²³

The notion of reshaping literature about the Chicana/o experience from a distinctly woman-centred and feminist stance is a crucial point, as Chicana writers' work had been largely ignored, even as the Chicano Movement gained force, because as Edwina Barvosa-Carter reminds us, at that time Chicano literature was dominated by male writers, who were considered more political, a bias which had the effect of seriously limiting the possibilities for Chicana writers in the 1970s and early 1980s.²⁴

Gloria Anzaldúa's essay 'Overcoming the Tradition of Silence', which criticizes the veil of silence imposed by Mexican mores on women, is equally applicable to the frequent critiques of Chicana writers, who drew

21 Yvonne Tasker, 'Bodies and Genres in Transition: *Girlfight* and *Real Women Have Curves*', in *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, ed. Christine Gledhill (Urbana/Chicago/Springfield: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2012), 84–96 (p. 95).

22 The references to the play and film in both scholarly and non-academic publications are far too numerous to catalogue exhaustively here but see, for example: Deborah Paredez, 'All About My (Absent) Mother: Young Latina Aspirations in *Real Women Have Curves* and *Ugly Betty*', in *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latina/o America*, ed. Gina M. Pérez, Frank A. Guridy & Adrian Burgos, Jr (New York: New York U. P., 2010), 129–48; and Daniel Enrique Pérez, *Rethinking Chicana/o and Latina/o Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 126–40.

23 Francisco Lomelí, *The Chicana@ Literary Imagination: A Collection of Critical Studies*, ed. Julio Cañero & Juan F. Elices (Alcalá de Henares: Instituto Franklin, Univ. de Alcalá, 2012), 121.

24 Edwina Barvosa-Carter, 'Breaking the Silence: Developments in the Publication and Politics of Chicana Creative Writing, 1973–1998', in *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends*, ed. David R. Maciel, Isidro D. Ortiz & María Herrera-Sobek (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2000), 261–85 (p. 267).

attention to uncomfortable truths that contradicted the public façade of the Chicano community as a harmonious, united family:

Muchachitas bien criadas, well-bred girls, don't answer back. *Es una falta de respeto* to talk back to one's mother or father. I remember one of the sins I'd recite to the priest in the confession box the few times I went to confession: talking back to my mother, *hablar pa' tras*, *repelar*. *Hocicon*, *repelona*, *chismosa*, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being *mal criada*. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I've never heard them applied to men.²⁵

Anzaldúa points here to a society in which women are denied a voice and to a hypocrisy that does not demand the same silence from men. A further silencing of these dissenting female voices occurred on the level of the dissemination of their work. As Tey Diana Rebolledo observes, texts that deal with alternatives to the Chicano heteronormative family, including those by Moraga, were often excluded from discussions of Chicano literature.²⁶ Ironically, in the same volume that contains Barvosa Carter's essay supporting Chicana writers, Arturo Ramírez seems to continue the tradition of dismissing their work. He denounces *Shadow of a Man*, as a 'harshly antimacho feminist work', while noting approvingly that Josefina López is 'much less strident than Moraga'.²⁷ Female critics, on the other hand, have generally praised Moraga for breaking the silence noted by Anzaldúa. Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano notes that: 'In *Giving Up the Ghost*, Cherríe Moraga broke a twenty-year silence in the Chicano theater movement by placing Chicana lesbian sexuality centre stage'.²⁸ Moraga herself confirms that telling stories that had been left out of Chicano literature was a key motivation for her writing:

My plays grew out of that place where my poetry and autobiographical essays left off, a place where I told my own story as honestly as I was

25 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 75.

26 Tey Diana Rebolledo, 'The Politics of Poetics: Or, What Am I, a Critic, Doing in This Text Anyhow?', in *Haciendo Caras/Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), 346–55 (p. 352).

27 Arturo Ramírez, 'Contemporary Chicano Theater', in *Chicano Renaissance*, ed. Maciel, Ortiz & Herrera-Sobek, 233–61 (p. 249).

28 Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano, 'Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective', in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: New Frontiers in American Literatures*, ed. María Herrera-Sobek & Helena María Viramontes (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1996), 213–20 (p. 218).

able [...] a space opened up inside me inviting entrance for the first time for fictional characters to speak their own stories.²⁹

To return to Arturo Ramírez's disparaging comments about Moraga's work and his approval of López's, the contrast he draws between the works of these writers ignores their many points of comparison. Both plays were first produced in the same year, and while a great deal of critical attention has been focused on the queer themes in Moraga's work, the family is also a key subject that she has returned to time and again. The comparisons between the two writers are nowhere more apparent than in their treatment of the theme of the family and mother-daughter conflicts in *Shadow of a Man* and *Real Women Have Curves*. Not only do both works question rigidly imposed gender roles, particularly the stereotype of the Latina as the good mother, but they also feature a rebellious young daughter and focus their critiques of the patriarchy not on the male characters but on the family matriarchs. As Ramón Gutiérrez asserts, '[i]f the aim of the Chicano movement was to decolonize the mind, as the novelist Tomás Rivera once proposed, Chicanas were determined to decolonize the body'.³⁰ It makes sense, then, that both playwrights foreground forms of sexuality that were hitherto considered taboo or transgressive in their work, whether this be gay desire or sex outside marriage.

Moraga's 1990 play *Shadow of a Man* charts the disastrous consequences of the repression of gay desire by Manuel Rodríguez, the father of a Mexican family living in Los Angeles. Manuel harbours a secret passion for his *compadre* Conrado. This hidden longing is further complicated by the fact that some thirteen years earlier (the play is set in 1969), Manuel had gone some way towards realizing his desire by allowing his wife, Hortensia, to spend the night with Conrado. The birth of a daughter, Lupe, resulted from this liaison. Manuel's secret is mirrored in turn by that of the teenage Lupe, who is also queer and in love with her high-school teacher, a nun.

Manuel's secret gay passion has attracted the bulk of critical commentary about the play, while the mother figure of Hortensia has been overlooked, yet one of the most effective aspects of this work is the way in which Moraga lampoons the stereotype of the Chicana mother through this character. Despite the fact that her youngest daughter Lupe's birth is the result of a sexual transgression, albeit one sanctioned by her husband, for much of the play Hortensia clings to the role of self-sacrificing mother, to the point

29 Quoted in Elizabeth C. Ramírez, *Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre: A History of Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2000), 119.

30 Ramón Gutiérrez, 'The Chicano Movement', in *Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies*, ed. Francisco A. Lomeli, Denise A. Segura & Elyette Benjamin-Labarthe (London/New York: Routledge, 2019), 59–68 (p. 63).

where she is more *machista* than the male characters and imposes strict restraints on her elder daughter, Leticia. When, during one of their many arguments, Leticia suggests that Hortensia has received little credit for having the children she is so proud of and states that she herself might not have children, Hortensia's putdown, '[t]hen you should of been born a man' (*Shadow of a Man*, 29), suggests that only men have the freedom to choose on such matters. Her insistence that men are naturally superior to women is further underlined in an earlier scene, when she refuses Leticia the same freedoms as her brother Rigo because she is female:

- LETICIA: Shoot, I'll be graduating in a month.
 HORTENSIA: You think graduating makes you una mujer. Eres mujer cuando te cases. Then your husband can worry about you, not me.
 LETICIA: Yeah, but Rigo can come and go as he pleases whether he's married or not.
 HORTENSIA: Claro. Es hombre. (*Shadow of a Man*, 18)

In Hortensia's view, not only are women subordinate to men but they do not even qualify as women until they are married, and even then, although they are freed from parental authority, they are subject to that of their husband. She herself repeatedly and unwittingly contradicts this view in the play, however, by constantly chiding her husband as well as her daughter. When Manuel comments disgustedly that his white wife is emasculating their son, she upbraids him for his bad language and orders him to sit, as if he were the child.

By underlining the chasm between the actions of the parents in the play and their publicly declared allegiance to traditional gender roles, Moraga suggests that individuals and their desires are far too varied and complex to conform to these standards. The tragic ending of the play, which sees Manuel commit suicide because he believes that he has failed to be a 'real' man, suggests that Chicano society must accept diversity and difference rather than impose outdated norms. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano observes:

Shadow's staging of painful aspects of Chicano culture responds to Moraga's belief that a theater that does not provide the opportunity for self-criticism, for looking within in addition to externally oriented protest, does a fundamental disservice to the community it represents [...] This self-criticism is part of the interrogation of the cultural construction of gender roles and the creation of a space within Chicano culture for the recognition of diverse and fluid sexual identities.³¹

31 Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, *The Wounded Heart: Writing on Cherrie Moraga* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2001), 63.

Moraga confirms this view in her analysis of the fundamentally flawed idea that Chicana/o families must present a unified front that denies the reality of their complex and often divisive relationships: 'We believe the more severely we protect the sex roles within the family, the stronger we will be as a unit in opposition 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'.³² In *Shadow of a Man*, Manuel's death comes as no surprise, as he is so tortured by the pressures to hide his true feelings by living up to the role of the *macho* that he succumbs to depression and alcoholism. His death symbolizes the end of patriarchal control in the play, a control that has long before this point been revealed to be the façade of a helpless man consumed by regret. Not long before his death, his control is already undermined by Hortensia's surprisingly honest admission to Leticia that she does not love her husband. This honesty prompts her daughter to reveal that she is no longer a virgin. Although at first Hortensia responds to this news in a judgmental manner, she also expresses relief that Leticia has protected herself and ultimately accepts that her daughter is a young woman who is free to make her own decisions about her sexual relationships.

A final point worth noting about the play is Lupe's choice of a nun, her teacher Sister Frances, as the object of her desire. Although this role has often been seen as utterly subject to the authority of the patriarchy represented by the Catholic Church, Anzaldúa takes a different view in *Borderlands* by pointing out that nuns can enjoy more freedom as they are allowed to 'escape motherhood'.³³ Alicia Gaspar de Alba has written both the novel *Sor Juana's Second Dream* (1999) and the recent opera *Juana* (2019) about the Mexican nun, writer and scholar Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. She credits her with leaving 'a legacy of early feminist thought that challenged the double standards of "stubborn men" and asserted a woman's right to share her mind and her work with the world and posterity'.³⁴ Sor Juana has been a pivotal figure for Chicana feminists and the nun here therefore represents an alternative role model for Lupe. Significantly, the play ends with Lupe's passionate statement of love for Sister Frances, thus providing the play's ultimate disavowal of heteronormative relationships as the only model for young women to follow.

López's play continues Moraga's exploration of the myriad and often contradictory familial pressures faced by Chicanas. *Real Women Have Curves*, which was first staged in California in 1990, is set in a garment factory owned by Chicana Estela. The protagonist, Ana, is her sister, a

32 Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 110.

33 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 39.

34 Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]Framing the 'Bad Woman': Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2014), 35.

recent high-school graduate who works in Estela's factory to save money to allow her to study writing at New York University. Their mother, Carmen, also works at the factory, along with several other women. Even more so than in *Shadow of a Man*, the play's questioning of *machismo* focuses on the female protagonists, as no men appear on the stage. The play's other main themes are the plight of the undocumented and body image. The stage directions tell us that all of the characters are somewhat overweight. López uses the characters' constant discussions about their bodies to examine the complex relationship between the domineering matriarch Carmen and her rebellious daughter Ana.

Carmen continually criticizes her daughters for being overweight, a *leitmotif* that surfaces in one of the play's most striking scenes, which is replicated in the film, when the women strip because they cannot bear the heat. As Carmen looks at Ana's body, she exclaims in disgust that she should lose weight if she ever hopes to marry. This exchange crystallizes the kind of family pressure endured by Chicanas, with marriage as the ultimate goal for women regardless of their ambitions and talents. Moreover, as in *Shadow of a Man*, it is the women who reinforce these sexist and limiting standards by attempting to make their daughters conform. This view is echoed in a number of contemporary texts in which Latina women criticize the standards they are expected to embrace. In Rosie Molinary's *Hijas Americanas: Beauty, Body Image and Growing Up Latina*, one respondent noted that her mother felt that constant commentary on her daughters' appearance was an essential part of her duty as a mother.³⁵ While Carmen is undoubtedly critical of her daughters, she ultimately supports Ana's ambitions and thus proves herself to be the embodiment of the good Chicana mother, as Lomelí notes.³⁶ Moreover, the family relationship, in the absence of men and in a female-led work space, is re-imagined, in the play, as María P. Figueroa observes: 'The factory [...] becomes the space where López resituates and repositions traditional familial relationships (i.e. mother and daughter), into unfamiliar or less traditional ones'.³⁷ While certain stereotypes of womanhood endure in the play, albeit largely in order to call them into question, what one would expect to be the stifling space of an overheated garment factory becomes a space of liberation. If Carmen does not fully understand Ana's ambitions, she does not hinder them, while it is she who gives Estela the inspiration to launch her own line of dresses in

35 Rosie Molinary, *Hijas Americanas: Beauty, Body Image, and Growing Up Latina* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007), 136–37.

36 Lomelí, *The Chicana@ Literary Imagination*, ed. Cañero & Elices, 247.

37 María P. Figueroa, 'Resisting "Beauty" and *Real Women Have Curves*', in *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicana/o Sexualities*, ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba (New York/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 265–83 (p. 275).

larger sizes, even suggesting that the women in the factory model them, a vision realized as the play concludes.

In the film adaptation of the play, however, the relationship between mother and daughter is far more combative and closely resembles the initial relationship between Hortensia and Leticia in *Shadow of a Man*. The objections of Ana's mother to her plan to attend college may seem baffling, but in terms of Chicana/o cinema, Ana's character is groundbreaking: she dares to challenge her family's expectations. Until the release of *Real Women Have Curves*, no feature-length film by a Chicana director, much less one based on a play by a Chicana and starring Chicana actors as the protagonists, had ever enjoyed mainstream success. Moreover, it is the first film about Chicano families that is not male-centred, unlike the earlier so-called crossover hit *La Bamba* (1987) by Luis Valdez, or Ramón Menéndez's *Stand and Deliver* (1988), the very similar story of the struggle of Latina/o high school students to achieve a college education.

In the film, Ana's attempts to create an identity that is separate from her family are constantly frustrated by her mother, although she has a full scholarship to attend Columbia University, so money is not an obstacle, as it was in the play. The tensions between Ana and Carmen are even more marked than those between Leticia and Hortensia in *Shadow of a Man*. Despite frequent rows with her elder daughter, Hortensia shows an interest in her college career. Moreover, as we have seen, she accepts her daughter's right to determine her sexual identity. Conversely, one of the most disturbing conflicts in *Real Women Have Curves* occurs when Carmen discovers that Ana has slept with her boyfriend. Carmen's reaction is couched in the same traditional language of virginity as a commodity used by Hortensia:

CARMEN: You're not only fat, now you're a puta!
 ANA: You would say that, wouldn't you?
 CARMEN: ¿Por qué no te diste tu valor?
 ANA: Because there's more to me than what's in between my
 legs.

Carmen goes further than verbally abusing her daughter, however, and descends into violence, slapping Ana. This exchange is played out as we hear a helicopter in the background, a reminder that the film is set not far from the Mexican border and of the generational tensions between mother and daughter, which result from the irreconcilable gulf between Ana's desire to achieve the American Dream and her mother's adherence to traditional Mexican values. Her mother's critical gaze at Ana's body also reduplicates that of the male surveyor so thoroughly documented in art history and the media by John Berger in *Ways of*

Seeing.³⁸ This ties in with the sound of the helicopter, used for surveillance of undocumented border crossers. While there are no men in this scene, their reifying gaze is present in the mother's and, on the auditory level, echoed by the helicopter.

Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson's article on the film provides a cogent synopsis of the many critiques of the adaptation. Numerous critics consider the film to be less feminist than the play because Ana's realization of her goals is heavily dependent on the support of her male teacher, her father and her grandfather. While I agree that the positive influence of the male characters is over-emphasized in the film, Rodríguez y Gibson's conclusion that Ana chooses to 'reject Mexican womanhood, distance herself from this community of women and their power over her' is debatable.³⁹ Rodríguez y Gibson notes repeatedly that Estela is 'estranged from Ana', when, in fact, there is no suggestion that this is the case.⁴⁰ While Estela does not accompany Ana to the airport, she embraces her when they say goodbye, saying 'you're going to do great, call me, okay?' There does seem to be a note of wistfulness on Estela's part here as her leave-taking is rather abrupt, but she supports Ana's ambition and clearly wishes her well. Moreover, Estela undoubtedly shares Ana's frustration with her mother's insistence on thinness and the importance of getting married. In addition, the feminist nature of the film is underlined with regard to the issue of body image. In the film, during an argument with her mother about whether she should lose weight, Ana's dialogue replicates a comment from a woman interviewed by Susie Orbach in her book *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, to whom López dedicates the play, along with the factory workers portrayed, thus making the link between the texts and their underlying ideologies explicit. Ana, meanwhile, far from abandoning her sister, is instrumental in helping her to keep her factory going. I would therefore contend that instead of presenting an assimilationist character who is 'relentlessly male-identified', as Rodríguez y Gibson asserts,⁴¹ the film rewrites the family dynamic to draw more attention to the mother-daughter conflict.

Carmen's sole opposition to Ana's plans underlines the fact that, as Moraga has poignantly demonstrated in *Shadow of a Man*, the family matriarch can be more *machista* than any patriarch. This tension is resolved in *Shadow of a Man*, but Carmen, in a very moving final scene, struggles to understand ambitions that are not part of her worldview, thus

38 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 2008 [1st ed. 1972]).

39 Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson, 'Crossing Over: Assimilation, Utopia and the *Bildungsroman* on Stage and Screen in *Real Women Have Curves*', *Camino Real*, 1:0 (2009), 135–51 (p. 149).

40 Rodríguez y Gibson, 'Crossing Over', 146.

41 Rodríguez y Gibson, 'Crossing Over', 143.

leading her to shun Ana. Carmen locks her bedroom door, leaving Ana to plead for her blessing to no avail. Thus, it is not Ana turning her back on the women in the film but rather her mother refusing to accept her daughter's individuality. The approval by every other character of Ana's plans, then, is a narrative device that exposes the senselessness of Carmen's cleaving to outdated traditions, and it is this insistence that creates the divisions in the family.

To conclude, López is, in fact, arguably even more 'strident' to use Ramírez's term, in her critique of the family than Moraga. In *Shadow of a Man*, Leticia and Hortensia manage to reconcile their differences and therefore rebuild a new kind of family after Manuel's death. Carmen's unwillingness to accept her daughter's ambitions means that she destroys, from within, the family she is so desperate to preserve. As the editors of the volume *The Sexuality of Latinas* observe: 'In the journey to the love of female self and each other we are ultimately forced to confront father, brother, and god (and mother his agent)'.⁴² By exposing the role of mothers in contributing to the oppression of women in Chicana/o families, both the plays and the film present new alternatives that acknowledge women's autonomy and their right to determine their own destinies. Taken together, *Shadow of a Man* and *Real Women Have Curves* not only provide diverse models for women, but also, crucially, insist that it is up to women to cast off the repressive traditions that have for too long marked Chicana/o culture. In so doing, they represent an important milestone in the creation of new Chicana identities free from the weight of the past.*

42 Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo & Cherríe Moraga, 'Introduction', in *The Sexuality of Latinas*, ed. Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo & Cherríe Moraga (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1993), 8–16 (p. 9).

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