Representations of Mexican American Migrant Childhood in Rivera’s... y no se lo tragó la tierra and Viramontes’s Under the feet of Jesus.

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Representations of Mexican American Migrant Childhood in Rivera’s ... Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra and Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus

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There are few authors more hallowed and respected in the field of Mexican American literature than Tomás Rivera. His life and writing were cut tragically short by a heart attack in 1984 when he was forty-eight, but his work continues to be widely read. Central to his prominence is his masterpiece, ... Y No Se Lo Tragó la Tierra (1995/1971). This book has been argued by Vernon Lattin to be deserving of consideration as “the first Chicano novel” (220). Manuel Villar Raso and María Herrera-Sobek assert:

It is impossible to overstate the importance of ... And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him in the development of contemporary Chicano literature. It presents two distinct yet related worlds: the Chicano migrant workers’ world of physical struggle against oppression, in which the problem is survival, and the child protagonist’s world of reflections, in which the main concern is the search for identity. (23)

The landmark status of ... Y No Se Lo Tragó la Tierra is amplified when the field of inquiry is narrowed to the topic of childhood among Mexican American migrants. Although a number of other narratives of migrancy have been written and published, few have gained the readership and critical attention received by Rivera’s reflections upon his experience as a child of migrant farmworkers.

The standing of ... Y No Se Lo Tragó la Tierra invites a Bakhtinian comparison of all subsequent literature on migrant childhood with Rivera’s work, since, as Roberta Fernández explains, “for Mikhail Bakhtin, all discourse [is] in dialogue with prior discourses on the same subject” (Fernández 76). For this reason, we will compare and contrast Rivera’s 1971 masterpiece with a later award-winning novel published in 1995. Under the Feet of Jesus was written by another adult child of migrancy, Third World feminist Helena María Viramontes. Although raised for the most part in the urban barrios of East Los Angeles, both Viramontes and her parents worked in the fields of California during her childhood (Viramontes, “Interview”; Saldívar-Hull). Thus, like Rivera, she was able to draw upon her own experiences as a migrant in creating her novel. Also like Rivera, she reflected back upon her migrant childhood from the relative privilege of a career in academia. As a novelist and scholar of Chicano literature, Viramontes must have had read and studied ... Y No Se Lo Tragó la Tierra before writing Under the Feet of Jesus. Marcus Embry briefly discussed this connection:

Viramontes’s text is clearly a retelling of Tomás Rivera’s 1971 classic ... From images of boys in trees, to constant travel, to learning to question authority, to a
final scene in which the protagonist has climbed up off the ground in order to face the future, when these texts are paired the contrast and retelling is evident. In the retelling one can see the development of Chicana voices and perspectives since the days of Rivera.²

Like Embry, we believe that Viramontes's novel can be understood as a feminist re-visioning of ... y no se lo tragó la tierra that addresses the most notable weaknesses of Rivera's depiction of the migrant experience. This article will further develop this relationship between the texts.

Read alone, each book represents the enduring power and oppression of the migrant childhood experience. But read together with an eye for their intertextual dialogue, the two books both gain new interpretations.

... y no se lo tragó la tierra and Under the Feet of Jesus

Before entering into the analysis of these two books, it is important to review how their basic plot, setting, and palette of characters compare and contrast. ... y no se lo tragó la tierra focuses upon a migrant community, largely as understood by an unnamed young male protagonist. The book takes place over the course of a year during the 1950s and uses multiple perspectives and voices to follow the boy's passage into adolescence. The narrative's setting moves between Texas and the upper Midwest, following the annual migration of the community being depicted. The book does not hesitate to describe the oppression of migrant life. At the midway point of the book, the protagonist bewails his family's condition to his mother: "How come we're like this, like we're buried alive? Either the germs eat us alive or the sun burns us up. Always some kind of sickness. And every day we work and work. For what?" (109).

Under the Feet of Jesus focuses on the migrant family of fourteen-year-old Estrella, her mother, Petra, her stepfather Perfecto, and her first love, Alejo. The book takes place over the course of one summer harvest season (apparently during the 1970s) and takes us inside the thoughts and voices of these four major characters. The book is set largely in a grape/raisin farm in the central valley of California. Like Rivera, Viramontes's narrator makes clear the tenuousness of the family's survival: "It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing" (4).

Formalist and Culturalist Approaches to Rivera and Viramontes

As a germinial text in Chicano literature, ... y no se lo tragó la tierra has merited close scrutiny from scholars over the past three decades. In surveying this body of scholarship and criticism, Joseph Sommers asserts that Rivera's book can be approached from three distinct but interrelated viewpoints: formalist, culturalist, and historical-dialectical (94-107). In order to provide structure to our study of the intertextual connections between ... y no se lo tragó la tierra and Under the Feet of Jesus, we will look at both texts from these three perspectives.

The first of Sommers's approaches is the traditional formalist perspective. Within this approach, a book is to be understood in terms of its aesthetic and literary relationship to canonical authors, which makes this approach to literature particularly unfulfilling in the case of narratives of migrant childhood. In the case of ... y no se lo tragó la tierra, Sommers
refers to “Faulkner, Joyce, Dos Passos, and Rulfo, in order of ascending significance” (94). In turn, Víramonte’s work has been compared to the critical social realism of Steinbeck and Sinclair. But, most frequently, Under the Feet of Jesus has been connected with the work of the new Chicana writers who gained prominence alongside her in the 1980s: Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and Lucha Corpi. Still, this perspective leaves under-explored the specific issues of social justice and cultural self-assertion that contribute to the literary power of the texts studied here.

This gap is partially addressed by Sommers’s second perspective, the culturalist approach. Herein, Rivera and Víramonte’s works are to be seen primarily as manifestations of Chicano culture, language, and experience. Within this culturalist frame, critics have proposed a variety of elements as central to Chicano literature, including pride in a glorious indigenous past, anguish regarding the tragic present, separation of Anglos and Chicanos, close-knit families, hard work, and high educational aspirations (Jiménez 4-15). For Sommers, the depictions of Chicano speech patterns, “conflict between religious orthodoxy and natural human impulse” (98), and the search for a decolonized identity are particularly salient for an understanding of... y no se lo tragó la tierra.

...y no se lo tragó la tierra echoes all of these Chicano culturalist themes, except that Rivera’s characters do not directly refer back to the glories of indigenous, pre-Conquista culture. Similarly, despite the fact that she has made such references elsewhere in other writings, Víramonte also does not invoke the indigenous past of Aztlan and Chicano legend in Under the Feet of Jesus. Also, Víramonte, writing in English spiced with bits of Spanish, is not as successful as Rivera was with his Spanish-based text in depicting the speech of Chicanos.

Looking across both books, however, their common cultural membership in the world of Chicano literature is clear. Both books build their plot tension on the basis of the daily anguish and tragedies of the oppressed migrant lives their protagonists are forced to lead simply to survive. Neither book depicts much interaction between the Chicano migrant world and the Anglo world. What interaction is portrayed by Rivera is nearly always negative, while Víramonte’s characters have almost no regular contact with the Anglo world. Both authors take us within the very small, limiting, and confusing world of migrants, a world defined by near total physical and psychological isolation. But their separation from Anglos is counterbalanced by their intimacy in their families and community. In both books, the families wash, eat, sleep, and work together; in fact they work tremendously hard. In both books, the characters value education, although this theme is better developed by Rivera, since his narrative spans a full year, while Víramonte is limited to a summer season when school is out. In particular, Rivera’s historia “It’s That It Hurts” presents the multifaceted dilemma faced by migrant children entering racist school systems while carrying the high hopes of their family that schooling will be the children’s ticket out of the fields.

Both novels develop conflicts over religion that are the origins for their titles. Rivera chose to entitle his novel... y no se lo tragó la tierra and thereby emphasize one historia above the thirteen others, an historia that depicts his protagonist’s greatest existential crisis—his realization that cursing God for the suffering of his family was not going to cause the earth to “devour him.” This historia, together with “Silvery Night” and “First Communion,” which frame it, reveals to Rivera’s protagonist the uselessness of traditional religious faith. In response, Rivera’s protagonist directly challenges the value of his mother’s votive candles and even tells her, “Don’t say it. I know what you’re going to tell me—that the poor go to heaven” (110).
Viramontes takes up this same radical stance by accusing traditional Catholicism of complicity with colonial oppression. In her personal writing manifesto in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Cara*, Viramontes commits herself to advocacy for “women under brutal repressive regimes” (“Nopalitos” 292; italics added for emphasis). This statement demonstrates her understanding of the oppressive implications of the first word in her title *Under the Feet of Jesus*, which implies that her entire novel can be read as proposing an anti-colonial understanding of Christianity as a colonizing religion that encourages and justifies the submission of the oppressed, both internally and socially. Thus, the fact that the pesticide spraying biplane that ruins Alejo’s health has a crucifix-shaped shadow is clearly not accidental. Later in the book, Estrella reaches an existential crisis parallel to that of Rivera’s protagonist. While at the clinic she thinks “God was mean and did not care and she was alone to fend for herself” (139), which she does moments later with a crowbar in hand. The beheading of Jesucristo at the end of *Under the Feet of Jesus* and Estrella’s climb toward the heavens establishes her independence from the faith of her mother and father. In this way, according to McCracken, “Viramontes suggests that a new model of female empowerment and strength can replace the traditional ethnic strategy of prayer and recourse to the protection of a deity. . . . the statue breaks, and Estrella herself symbolically replaces the image as she stands tall atop the barn that she has been forbidden to enter” (183).

As can be seen from this analysis, both books treat a key theme of Chicano literature in similar fashions. Thus, from a culturalist perspective, the intertextual dialogue between the texts can be established. Nonetheless, the culturalist perspective is insufficient as an approach to novels regarding migrancy since it cannot explain how the specific forms of migrant cultural superstructures have been determined by the underlying oppressive economic relationships that define migrancy.

**Historical-Dialectal Approaches to the Contexts of Rivera and Viramontes**

In order to construct the relationships that define migrancy, one must turn to Sommers’s third approach, the historical-dialectical method, which integrates the strengths of the preceding two approaches while adding historical and political interpretations. According to Sommers, this method first attends to the social context of the writer at the time of his/her writing.

In the case of Rivera, according to Brooke Fredrickson, the “radical social and artistic change during the late 1960s and early 1970s” (145) must be taken into account when examining . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra*. Sommers notes the important fact that Tomás Rivera, as a former resident of Crystal City, Texas, must have been aware of the unprecedented rise to power of *La Raza Unida* party in that city and its eventual spread to sixteen other states (see I. García). Similarly, as a former migrant worker, Rivera certainly was influenced by the successful activism of César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and the United Farm Workers, as detailed by Ferris and Sandalo. These political and economic changes opened a new set of potentialities in the Mexican American and migrant communities of the United States. Rivera responds to this hopeful context by presenting in . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra* a protagonist whose existential crisis leads to a personal liberating freedom rather than to oppressive resignation or social activism. “He felt at peace as never before. He felt as though he had become detached from everything. He no longer worried about
his father nor his brother. All that he awaited was the new day, the freshness of the morn-
ing” (111). By the end of the book, the protagonist is reborn out of his “womb” under the
house. But his only action is to climb a tree and wave to an imaginary playmate so as to
confirm his own existence. Apparently change will come to this boy if he simply estab-
lishes his being and waits for the coming dawn.

Viramontes’s writing emerged during a much less hopeful time. The reactionary
response to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s reached its peak in the 1980s
during the Reagan–Bush administration and then again in 1994 with the “Republican rev-
olution” that brought Newt Gingrich to power in Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, the
anti-immigrant and antibilingual education ballot initiatives of the 1990s have forced
many Chicano activists into defensive postures, scrambling to minimize the damage to
what had been won a generation earlier. Finally, for Viramontes in particular, the Los
Angeles riots of 1992 must weigh heavily as they demonstrated the lack of progress toward
social justice in her own hometown. Thus, Viramontes’s Estrella is not as blindly hopeful
when she experiences her existential crisis and passage into adulthood. Unlike Rivera’s
protagonist, she remains angry and prompted to action by the injustice of it all. And
although Estrella also climbs up high and appears “as an angel standing on the verge of
faith” (176) at the end of this novel, it must be remembered how unstable her footing is—
for she stands upon a barn that could collapse at any moment. Standing still could bring
her disaster. Action is needed if social change is to occur.

There is still another crucial contrast with regard to the historical contexts of the
authors. Many of the strongest critiques of... y no se lo tragó la tierra have stemmed from
a feminist analysis of the text. This can be explained in terms of Rivera’s context and times.
As has been well documented elsewhere, the direction of the early years of the Chicano
renaissance were largely determined by the male leadership of el movimiento, with women
occupying, at best, token leadership roles as secretaries. Most Chicano prose of this era
was male-centered. Thus unsurprisingly, Rivera, failed to adequately address the experi-
ences of migrant women. For example, Joseph Sommers writes that in... y no se lo tragó
la tierra, “women tend to be presented either as passive prisoners of traditional culture in
its most static form, or as tempters whose charms provoke men to tragedy” (106). One of
the most notable examples of this weakness in the text is the suicide of Ramón in “The
Night the Lights Went Out” over the infidelity of his girlfriend.

In more recent examinations of... y no se lo tragó la tierra these portrayals have been
exposed for the sexist oppression that lies at their base. Ellen McCracken notes, for ex-
ample, that “Despite their historical and literary importance, classic Chicano... narratives
such as Tomás Rivera’s... y no se lo tragó la tierra... viewed women’s experiences from the
outside, leaving a number of political and cultural issues to be developed from the various
perspectives of the new Latina narrativists” (4).

As one of these “new Chicana narrativists” that emerged in the 1980s, Viramontes has
been recognized as a strong feminist writer. In some of her earlier stories, she fictionalized
her own childhood experiences as the daughter of a sexist, verbally abusive father and used
those experiences as the basis for her challenges to patriarchy. In fact, Sonia Saldívar-Hull
notes the “almost entirely negative portrayal of men” (184) in Viramontes’s earlier work The
Moths and Other Stories. In referring to her childhood, Viramontes states that the one who
held the family together was her mother, while it was the father who terrorized the children:

If my mother was the fiber that held a family together, it was my father who kept
snapping at it with his oppressive cruelty... He drank, and was mean. Impatient,
screaming a lot of the time, temper tantrums, we were often trembling in his presence. If my mother showed all that is good in being female, my father showed all that is bad in being male. ("Nopalitos" 292)

Projecting this experience on her character, Viramontes presents a scene in which Estrella recalls the fear that held her mother to her father: "To run away from your husband would be a mistake. He would stalk her and the children, not because he wanted them back... but because it was a slap in the face, and he would swear over the seventh beer that he would find her and kill them all" (13).

But Viramontes's feminism is not simply an angry response to an oppressive childhood. As an intellectually thoughtful and emotionally empathetic writer, Viramontes wrote in 1990, after the publication of The Moths and Other Stories and before Under the Feet of Jesus, about her childhood-based dichotomy of mother = good / father = bad: "I'm only now understanding the depth of this conclusion, and am making a serious effort to erase this black and white. See the good and bad in both sexes. That's the power of imagination, pecking beyond the fence of your own personal reality and seeing the possibility thereafter" ("Nopalitos" 292).

In this self-examination we find the origin of the primary male character in Under the Feet of Jesus. Viramontes's desire to imagine a more nuanced understanding of gender roles leads to the birth of a fully developed male character, Perfecto Flores, a generous, tired old man whose labor supports his adopted family. In this way, she is able to, at least in part, accomplish what Saldívar-Hull understands as her goal. In Saldívar-Hull's words, Viramontes "seeks to transform and rework the concept of the Chicano family, not destroy it" (131). Cecilia Lawless describes how Viramontes's feminism manifests itself in Under the Feet of Jesus: "Conventional Mexican American texts, especially those written in the sixties and seventies by male writers, implicitly support the idea of the contented woman as the domestic angel, while Viramontes's text explicitly undermines any unthinking acceptance of such ideology" (375).

Estrella is anything but an unthinking, compliant, and forgiving "domestic angel." She is an assertive, rebellious firebrand who challenges the injustices of the world around her with actions, not just words. In recognition of this, Perfecto, a man five times her age, treats her as a near equal in the family decision-making, as can be seen in this scene regarding who will receive medical attention, Estrella's mother or Estrella's lover Alejo:

---Alejo needs a doctor. She said, hoping he would understand and accept the barrier.
---I thought it was your mama... I thought she'd be the one, Perfecto replied, taken aback. Estrella's face had a strange yellowish glow over the burning lantern light.
---Is she sicker, Perfecto?
---I'm not a doctor and neither are you.
---He can't talk anymore. He loved to talk, Perfecto, don't you see?
---And your mama?
---Why are you making me choose?
---Because it comes down to that. (126-27)

As result of these struggles, Estrella will not grow up to resemble the anxious and ineffectual women of Rivera's "A Prayer" and "The Night Before Christmas." She has already made her declaration of independence and enters adulthood unbowed by the responsibilities and challenges before her.
Historical-Dialectical Approaches to the Texts of Rivera and Viramontes

According to Sommers, the historical-dialectical approach generally moves from an analysis of context to text in order to examine how an author’s choice of narrative techniques and structures “embodies a complex system of values and can be analyzed in terms of meaning and ideological contradictions” (102). Evocative of McLuhan’s assertion that “the medium is the message,” this approach moves beyond the formalist search for aesthetics to an understanding that the form of the novel is meaningful.

Rivera was writing during the early years of the Chicano movement when the project of establishing a Chicano identity through art was understood as essential. As Ellen McCracken states: “Crucial to the initial stages of oppositional movements, identity politics function to consolidate the constituents of a subcultural group through commonality and difference. Group identity is forged both through internal shared experience and oppositionality to the Other” (179). Rivera’s novel serves precisely this purpose by representing Chicano collective consciousness through the structure of his text. Using narrative fragmentation and multi-voicing in ... y no se lo tragó la tierra, he builds an understanding of the collective—rather than the individual—experiences and identities of Mexican American farm laborers. The “cultivation and negotiation of familial and communal knowledge” among and within migrants—the making of sense out of the incomprehensible and inhumane—is repeatedly demonstrated in loving detail through a multiplicity of dialogues. Brooke Fredrickson elaborates how the novel’s structure reinforces its content:

Rivera’s narrative can be called a “migratory narrative,” that is, a novel that is mobile in itself, moving from story to story, from consciousness to consciousness, never losing a sense of the personal and individual struggle while including a collective of voices and building a community... Rivera’s narrative uses fragmentation to develop coherence and community, collectivity and commonality. ... These voices are distinct, separate, yet fit together to form a pattern of hardship and misery that is also a picture of a community because the hardship is shared. (143-45)

Viramontes also makes use of narrative fragmentation and multi-voicing, although not to the same extent as Rivera, for instead of seeking to create a community, Viramontes’s objective is the creation of a family—thus requiring fewer voices and shifts of perspective. Nonetheless, Lawless states that “often Under the Feet of Jesus reads as a disconnected series of short story vignettes that the reader must in some way assemble” while, on a smaller scale, “the blocks of text will swing back and forth between two characters to express simultaneity” (367-68).

Thus, Viramontes, like Rivera, uses a fragmented narrative and multi-voicing, but she does not compose with a “symphony” of voices—rather, hers is a more intimate “quartet” of voices with whom we become quite familiar by the end of the book. In comparison, by the close of ... y no se lo tragó la tierra, we have heard a wider array of distinguishable voices, but many remain relatively anonymous because they are heard only once or twice. For this reason, the reader is unable to develop the same intimacy with the characters in Rivera’s text.

But fragmentation and multi-voicing does more than build a community/familial identity. Fredrickson claims that it serves a purpose vis-à-vis literary politics as well: “The fragmentary form of Rivera’s novel ... breaks apart conventions that would force the novel
into the form determined by the experiences of the members of the white, middle- and upper-class hegemonic culture rather than by the culture it so vividly portrays” (144). In fact, Rivera’s work is so nontraditional in its structure (a cycle of twelve historias and two framing pieces, connected by small vignettes) that a whole discourse has developed over how to classify it. Under the Feet of Jesus is clearly more traditional in its structure (five well-defined chapters), and thus its status as a novel is unchallenged. Despite Fredrickson’s assertions regarding “migratory narrative,” Viramontes’s text is no less representative of the migrant experience for not having been structured in an antihegemonic fashion. In fact, Viramontes’s choice may make her novel more accessible for readers accustomed to traditional literary forms and thus allow greater access to her political message. Nonetheless, this contrast marks the unique literary inventiveness of Rivera’s prose.

The Oppressions of Migrancy and the Politics of Rivera and Viramontes

As discussed earlier, both Rivera and Viramontes do not shy away from presenting the multiple forms of oppression experienced by migrant families, such as:

- Risks of illegal immigration
- Substandard housing and wages
- Exhausting, unhealthy work conditions—especially pesticide exposure
- Child labor and children in the fields and barns
- Continual movement and lack of access to medical and social services

Rivera addresses the microeconomic perspectives of his multi-voiced community. The historia “When We Arrive” is brimming with individuals’ thoughts about their personal struggles to feed themselves and their families. But, the narrative rarely ties their oppression to the nature of the larger macroeconomic system that constrains their lives. For this reason, the politics of Rivera’s text do not go beyond what Fredrickson characterizes as “the nascent stirrings of resistance” (148). When faced with inhumanity and injustice, Rivera’s characters rarely strike out at their oppressors. They submit, retreat, and pray instead. Thus, Rivera’s pueblo is limited to an unending struggle for survival. Rivera’s lack of assertive activism and social protest has been a point of discussion regarding... y no se lo tragó la tierra.10

Viramontes, on the other hand, cuts to the heart of the systematic exploitation of migrants by the American agricultural and food industry. Particularly effective are Estrella’s ruminations about the disjuncture between her reality in the fields and the commercial representation of her work on a Sun-Maid Raisins box.

Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the market, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella’s eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. (49-50)

The consequences of industrial farming and resultant pesticide poisoning are also beautifully developed by Viramontes at the end of chapter two. She writes of the simultaneous
spraying of Alejo and Perfecto's struggles for memory (memories of birth defects and cancer, fears of babies born without mouths), while all around, a rain of dead insects falls.

Given these misrepresentations and terrors, Viramontes does not accept inaction as an alternative. The neglect and exploitation of migrants by society at large does not allow her to "leave it be." Estrella is defined as a girl-woman of action, not words, in the first chapter when her mother Petra says, "For the pay we get, they're lucky we don't burn the orchards down" and Estrella replies, "No sense talking tough unless you do it" (45).

Viramontes's stance becomes entirely clear in the climatic confrontation with the nurse at the clinic. Lawless has stated, "For this nurse, and much of mainstream American society, Estrella and her family represent mere means to an end" (372). But Estrella rejects this dehumanization and acts against it. "Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed them as much as they owed her" (148). The nurse owes her job at the clinic to the existence of the migrant community just as she owes the food that she would serve that evening to her children to migrant labor in the fields. It is with this quiet revelation of the power within her oppression that Estrella takes action and intimidates the nurse into returning their desperately needed money. Estrella states, "They make you that way . . . You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick up a crowbar and break pictures of their children, and all of a sudden, they listen real fast" (151).

McCranken explains the factors involved in Estrella's situation that aggravate her but at the same time move her toward an active position: "The coming of age of Estrella . . . is inseparable from the crossing of gender barriers, ethnic solidarity, and standing strong against such social evils as substandard wages, poor living conditions, pesticide contamination, and lack of access to adequate health care" (182).

Viramontes leaves us with no doubt that the future belongs to Estrella and her form of self-assertive action and advocacy. In contrast, Rivera leaves us wondering just what will his man-child protagonist actually do, if anything, to better his lot in life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as this analysis has shown, . . . y no se lo tragó la tierra and Under the Feet of Jesus are strong and important literary texts that stand in close relation to each other. Both texts treat the subject of migrant childhood by affirming central themes of Chicano literature. Moreover, their intertextual parallels in plot structure and action require an acknowledgment that Viramontes wrote in a direct dialogue with Rivera's text.

Nonetheless, the books diverge widely on a number of other points. Rivera wrote during a radical period of U.S. history, one bursting with hopeful possibilities for those who were waiting to welcome the new dawn, about a period that preceded this hopeful era. Viramontes wrote during a reactionary time when the hopes of the 1960s had proven inadequate and progressive forces had learned that only sustained direct action had any chance of resisting the oppressive tide. Also, Rivera ignored the questions raised by second-wave feminism because he could: its challenges had yet to find a voice in the field of Chicano letters. Viramontes, in contrast, is one of the Chicana narrativists who broadened the discourse of Mexican American literature to include the voices and perspectives of women. Ironically, Rivera's position can be characterized as masculine passivity when compared with Viramontes's feminist activist stance.

In structuring his text, however, Rivera can be considered more innovative than Viramontes. Her use of multi-voicing and narrative fragmentation is effective, but it pales
in comparison to the complexity of Rivera's work. Thus, although from a radical political stance Viramontes may have written a more appealing text, Rivera's work could be considered more accomplished in literary terms. Read together, though, their strengths and weaknesses are clearly complementary and they enable the reader to construct a deeper understanding of the migrant experience of Chicanos past and today.

Notes

1 These include The Plum Plum Pickers by Raymond Barrio, The Rain God and Migrant South by Arturo Islas, Crónica de Aztlán by Arturo Reche Alvarado, Blush Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya, Barrio Boy by Ernesto Galarza, Mestiza by Victor R. Villasenor, Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan, Luck by Eric Martin, The Circuit by Francisco Jiménez, Barefoot Heart by Elva Treviño Hart, and When Living Was a Labor Camp by Diana García.

2 Embassy 315. See also Aragón, "Genealogy," and Helsper, "Finding the Metaphorical Key."

3 Publisher's Weekly, cited on the cover of Helena María Viramontes, Under the Feet of Jesus (New York: Plume Books, 1995).


5 See also Garza and Rivera 42-64.

6 In her "Cariboo Café," Viramontes participates in Anzaldúa's call to reimagine a borderland mythology by "not merely questioning misogynist views in [Chicano] culture but actively and creatively changing the symbology of the legends" by recasting the pre-Columbian figure La Llorona as the contemporary mother of los desaparecidos of Latin America (Fernández 82).


8 Beck, "Review of Close to Home," par. 15. See also Valdés, Con Respeto.

9 Brooke Fredrickson states ". . . y no se lo tragó la tierra has variously been called a novel, a collection of short stories and anecdotes, a fragmented text, and a dialectical conversation" (143). Ellen McCracken categorizes . . . y no se lo tragó la tierra as a "hybrid narrative genre that merges the short story and the novel" (71). Sonia Saldívar-Hull likens the book to a collection of historias.

10 Garza and Rivera 42-64. See also Grajeda 71-81.

Works Cited


Rivera, Tomás. ... y no se le tragó la tierra... And the Earth Did Not Devour Him. Houston: Arte Público P, 1995/1971.


