

WOMEN AND MEN IN *FACE OF AN ANGEL*, BY DENISE CHÁVEZ: CHICANO UNIVERSE THROUGH GENDER CONFRONTATION

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Abstract

The present article intends to discuss the cutout of the Chicano universe portrayed in the novel *Face of an Angel*, by Denise Chávez. By the narrator/protagonist's voice, the intimacy of seven couple nuclei are exposed and function as the guidelines to epitomize what is being denominated here as "gender confrontation".

Resumo

O presente artigo tem por finalidade discutir o universo chicano representado no romance *Face of an Angel*, de Denise Chávez. Por intermédio da voz da narradora/protagonista, expõe-se a intimidade dos núcleos formados por sete casais que funcionam como diretrizes do que aqui se denomina "confronto de gêneros".

Men can be like [...] guacamole. A nice appetizer, a little spicy, but not a full-course meal. Don't put too much stock in men. They will have to prove their mettle.

Denise Chávez – *Face of an Angel*

While reading Denise Chávez¹'s *Face of an Angel*, any reader is able to notice that, in spite of the assortment of issues concerning Chicano² universe raised in the novel, gender confrontation undoubtedly pervades the first person narrative by Soveida Dosamantes, the narrator/protagonist endowed with the mission of telling her family's story. The present article focuses on the inequality of gender roles which characterizes Chicano society, having as samples some of the most relevant couples in the narrative: the narrator/protagonist's great-grandparents, who are the founders of the Dosamantes family, the narrator/protagonist's parents, and Soveida's own relationships. Thus, the Chicano community that the readers have access to is one described in accordance with a woman's viewpoint, a woman who suffers discrimination on four levels: on the part of white Anglo males for being both a woman and a woman of Mexican background; on the part of Chicanos, her male ethnic counterparts, for being a woman; on the part of white women for being a Chicana; and on the part of other Chicanas of a higher social stratum. My option for this line of research was not occasional or purposeless: the question of family is crucial for this society and for Chicana writers who seek, through writing, to desecrate³ the smallest unit of an androcentric social frame. For the investigation I here propose, I used the works by Gloria Anzaldúa, Ellen McCracken, Alvina Quintana, Paula Moya, Phillipa Kafka and others.

¹ Regarded as one of the leading Chicana writers. Denise Chávez was awarded three literary prizes due to the tremendous success of her novel *Face of an Angel*. Like many other Chicana writers, Chávez brings autobiographical elements to the fictional ambience she creates.

² According to Alvina Quintana (1996, p. 7), the term Chicano acquired a new meaning, one that bears proud of miscegenation, unlike the prejudiced Mexican American.

³ The verb "to desecrate" is being used here in the following sense: "to violate the sacredness of" (source: thefreedictionary.com/desecrate), as family is seen as a sacred social institution, and as such, must be unquestionable and kept under protection.

1) Elena Harrell and Manuel Dosamantes: Chicano Consciousness in the Late Nineteenth Century.

Despite having come from such diverse backgrounds, Elena Harrell and Manuel Dosamantes keep between them meaningful similarities. From the very beginning, Manuel and Elena, tacitly to a certain extent, agreed upon building a relationship based on ethnic awareness. In a purist and conservationist attitude, the characters in focus decided to have their first talk “in Spanish”, afraid of losing their ability to communicate in their mother tongue. Concerning this issue, professor Ana Celia Zentella – referred to by McCracken – points out that “Spanish is being lost at a tremendous rate among U.S. Latinos” (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 6). Considering that language is the means by which humans can express ideas and feelings, that conversation in Spanish with Manuel Dosamantes made Elena Harrell feel “so comfortable [that] she didn’t have to be Elena Harrell, American citizen” (CHÁVEZ, 1995, p. 10⁴). In other words, based on Soveida’s narrative, Elena Harrell’s being an American citizen was not an inherent feature of hers: culturally speaking, Elena was a Mexican and, as such, a Spanish native speaker. From Soveida’s account, it seems accurate to affirm that Elena’s American portion was something socially (at family level) constructed, which caused her a great discomfort. On a cultural and also emotional basis, meeting Manuel was a relief to Elena; with him, she could be just herself: “a Mexican whose father was an Anglo”. Indeed, it was Manuel who unloaded from her the uncomfortable burden of “having to be an Anglo”. On the other hand, it was Elena who helped Manuel get rid of the recurrent nightmares that he had been having since he had run away from Fort Davis, where he was about to be forced to marry Tobarda Acosta, the daughter to a rich former employer of his. Therefore, Elena embodied the perfect woman Manuel had been dreaming of all his life and was the only one able to put an end to the horrible bad dreams that had tormented him for so long. What seems to be meaningful to an analysis of Chávez’s novel is that what drew Elena and Manuel together was above all the pride of being of Mexican background, a feature they pleasantly shared.

Regarding the fact that Manuel Dosamantes and Elena Harrell had been made to each other and perfectly fulfilled each other’s needs, it seems legitimate to state that Denise Chávez could not have conceived more suitable characters to represent the Dosamantes’ **foundational myths**, to use here Jamaican cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s terminology. By creating two characters such as Manuel and Elena, Chávez could not have made a better origin for the Dosamantes’: a harmonious couple, who shared principles and, more importantly, a common ethnic heritage they cherished and made a pact to preserve even on American soil. Thus, there is the heroic persona of Manuel Dosamantes, who traces a long trajectory in search of better conditions of life, as professor Francine Ritcher (1999) observes:

⁴ From here on, all the references to the novel will be indicated by the number of the page only.

Manuel's character [...] is a sort of modern pioneer who endures noteworthy physical and mental stress out of his normal environment, finding that the old ways of existing, thinking and experiencing will not fit the new era. Therefore, he must cross not only geographical borders but psychological ones as well as he challenges himself to find innovative ways of dealing with a new way of life in the southwestern setting" (RICHTER, 1999, p. 281).

Even knowing that this crossing was casual, as Manuel only left Fort Davis to avoid marrying Tobarda, this geographical and psychological trespassing indeed occurred. Considering Manuel's trajectory since the moment he leaves Guanajuato, his homeland, up to the moment he arrives in Agua Oscura⁵, the reader meets a character similar to those medieval chivalrous knights recreated in the nineteenth century by romantic writers. As Richter (1999) argues:

In [the] sequence of events [experienced by Manuel Dosamantes] is embedded much of the traditional path of the hero: the departure from the homeland and separation from all that is familiar, the quest or difficult task that must be performed, and the reward, in this case the beautiful damsel, [Elena Harrel], with a kingly father [, incarnating the oppressor Anglo], and prosperity in a new land where the hero is a near a king himself, having acquired a 500-acre farm, "various" employees, and a great deal of land in Agua Oscura (RICHTER, 1999, 281).

In short, it seems appropriate to state that, while locating the origin of Soveida's family tree in so valorous characters, Denise Chávez devises a noble version of Adam and Eve for the Dosamantes – according to Richter, "two lovers" (RICHTER, 1999, p. 282). In engendering such "illustrious pair of lovers [with] [...] honor-bond, exemplary lives" (RICHTER, 1999, p. 282), Chávez aims to prove that nobility and honor may be born out of hybridity, contrary to what the white European mainstream attempts to enforce.

2) The Contending Luardo and Dolores Dosamantes

If the Dosamantes family found in Manuel Dosamantes and Elena Harrell a genesis marked by harmony, love and cultural awareness, it seems that these positive features were a privilege of their founders.

Out of the seven couple nuclei here analysed, the narrator/protagonist's parents seem to embody the seemingly traditional Chicano couple. Underneath that apparent mainstream marital arrangement lie all sorts of problems. On one side, there is Luardo Dosamantes, the youngest among Mamá Lupita's children, "[the one who] was [her] baby and favorite child, [the one who] at the age of four [...] still had to be carried everywhere" (p. 33). Due to his mother's overprotection, Luardo grew up with a great difficulty to make decisions, as Soveida herself asserts: "[it was] a tremendous burden on him to have an opinion. As a result, he rarely did. If he did have an opinion, it was

⁵ In *Face of an Angel*, Chávez mixes factual and fictional geographical references, such as Agua Oscura (the fictional small village that works as the novel's scenario) and Guanajuato (one of the thirty-one real Mexican states).

wrestled from him after much prodding, prolonged debate, and confrontation” (p. 33). No wonder that, after a long life of lack of self-assurance, Luardo, in his old age, develops some sort of “insurance mania”. As Soveida herself concludes, “[Luardo] was prepared – for disease, damage, mutilation, and even death. What he wasn’t prepared for was life.” (p. 12), making the reader infer that all that compulsion for insurance was just a compensation for Luardo’s insecurity. In the chapter entitled “Insurance”, Soveida tells the reader about an agreement she had made with her father: she would help him move out whenever he needed or wanted to and also clean and organize his new home (a task “naturally” designed for women, according to Luardo’s view); in turn, he would help her pay her bills (the role of provider socially designed for men). While narrating this episode, Soveida not only evidences once more her father’s unreliable character but also communicates his view of gender roles. While Soveida was cleaning his house, Luardo “left quickly, quietly, with another promise to return soon” (p. 13). Soveida then continues outlining her father’s character:

My work was almost done. Luardo felt he was in the way. Women’s work, that was it. Men were in the way. Cleaning, scrubbing, all those cleansers, knowledge of vacuum cleaners, washers, electrical appliances, household gadgets, anything having to do with house or yard or animal anything living or non-living that required attention, care and maintenance, was of no concern to Luardo Dosamantes (p. 13).

Luardo not only insists on keeping away from what he thought was just a woman’s duty, but also away from those household chores traditionally destined to men (maintenance). Anything that requires responsibility and zeal did not suit him. In building such a character, Denise Chávez dismantles the typical Chicano icon, the macho, who, in spite of being exploitative and oppressor, must be protective towards his family, which implies features such as strength and self-assurance, characteristics that Luardo Dosamantes definitely lacks. By leaving the house while Soveida is cleaning it, Luardo helps depict the Chicano viewpoint of male and female roles within a family: the public sphere must be occupied by men, while the private one is destined to women. While discussing gender roles in Chicano society, Ni Luh Putu Rosiandani (2006) quotes scholars Miguel De La Torre and Edwin David Aponte – Cuban and Puerto Rican, respectively:

For Latinos, to be a man, a macho, implies both domination and protection for those under them, specifically the females in the family. The macho worldview creates a dichotomy in which men operate within the public sphere [...] while women are relegated to the private sphere, especially home. The family’s honor is augmented by the ability of the macho to provide for the family. (DE LA TORRE; APONTE apud Rosiandani, N.L.P. 2006, p. 19).

Even after Chicano community has gone through some changes, Luardo Dosamantes uses his economic power to get rid of chores he does not see as “naturally made for men to carry out”. In doing so, although in a situation different from it used to be, Luardo (and also Soveida) contributes to perpetuate one of the typical features of Chicano society: machismo. While discussing this concept, Saldívar-Hull (2000), quoting U.S. sociologist Maxine Baca Zinn, reaches an interesting conclusion towards

the term. As Saldívar-Hull argues, the image of the Latino macho is an American construction aiming to reinforce and legitimize the stereotypes of “[the] Mexican males’ inherent traits of ‘irresponsibility, inferiority, and ineptitude’” (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000, p. 129). She then goes on explaining her own concept of machismo by concluding and suggesting that:

[m]achismo, in this construction, is men’s overcompensation for psychological feelings of ‘inadequacy and worthlessness’. Rather than rely on stereotype, [Baca Zinn] proposes that the ideology of machismo be liberated, reclaimed, and refined by Chicanos themselves [...] (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000, p. 129).

On the other side, there is the feminine component of this gender binomial: Dolores Dosamantes. If, on the one hand, there is the untrustworthy (in all senses) Luardo, on the other, there is the gloomy Dolores – “dolor”, the Spanish word which means “pain” – who fits the socially constructed gender role of a woman. Coming from a family of a lower social layer than Luardo’s, Dolores got married, like so many other women, to escape the stressful home she had grown up in, a home whose father kept on leaving and a mother who kept on waiting.

In the fifth chapter of *Face of an Angel*, which bears the bilingual⁶ title “Y tu, qué? And What About You?”, the narrator/protagonist gives voice to her parents so that they can tell their own stories. U.S.⁷ scholar Linda Naranjo-Huebl (2007) makes an elucidatory comment on the textual strategy employed by Chávez in the chapter now focused on:

In a provocative chapter, Chávez uses two columns per page to juxtapose streams of consciousness of both Luardo and Dolores as they recount their stories. The format underscores the two radically different foci of their stories, which occasionally synchronize over shared memory (NARANJO-HUEBL, 2007, p. 56).

Therefore, in an apparently scrambled text, printed in a newspaper format (two columns of text printed on the same page), Luardo and Dolores focus their discourses on different topics⁸. While she rebuilds her past by talking about her original family, the Loeras, he devotes his narrative to talk about Dolores, how they met, what in her attracted him the most, what a woman should be like, besides reflecting over their marital relationship. If Dolores uses her narrative to rescue her past and try to identify the origin of the dismal environment she grew up in, it is Luardo who tries to make an inventory of their marriage:

The Dolores I first met was wild, eager, spirited [...] It’s hard for me to talk. [...] After that year I never saw the woman I loved again. These last two years we’ve been two strangers cohabiting the same space, nodding and holding mumbled conversations, not knowing or

⁶ Bilingualism is another issue discussed by Chicana writers and raised in *Face of an Angel*. However, it is not the purpose of this article to deal with it.

⁷ The abbreviation “US” is being used here as an adjective, instead of using the term “American”, for understanding that latter truly refers to other nationalities within all Americas and not only to the United States.

⁸ Dolores’s discourse is in the column on the left and Luardo’s on the right – see ANNEXE.

caring if the other heard. We listen to each other abstractedly, halfheartedly, ignoring the occasional spontaneous bursts that sputter out like bubbles of saliva and are swallowed (p. 24).

Contrary to the stereotyped Chicano macho, at least in the passage now in question, Luardo Dosamantes makes use of the space the narrator/protagonist opens for him and Dolores to “relocate [their] family from [a] secretive, barricaded [site] (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000, p. 24) . Despite being described as irresponsible and careless when it comes to family, home and marital relationship, Luardo manages to make a sincere and precise assessment of his marriage with Dolores. In making these sensitive words come out of Luardo’s mouth (and heart), Chávez once more desecrates the image of the Chicano macho. It is a man whose personality is the result of the way Chicano families raise their male members that uses the private space of writing to confide his sorrow for his failed marriage, even if “it is hard for [him] to talk” (p. 23). The apparently superficial and immature Luardo is aware that his relationship with Dolores is nothing more than “two strangers cohabiting the same space” (p. 24) and that the truths they let out during the many arguments they had had were just “bubbles of saliva that were sputtered and swallowed” (p. 24) for the sake of keeping a “family”.

In the last chapters of *Face of an Angel*, the reader is informed about the destiny of such clashing couple. Considering the courses that Luardo and Dolores ran along the novel, it is quite interesting to observe the fates Chávez reserved for each of them. As to Luardo, the typical Chicano macho, who bore a façade of strength, but was indeed an everlasting child, the one who was prepared for anything but life, after a long while in hospital, goes back to his mother’s house in order to die at home. In “El Remolino⁹”, the fifty-fourth chapter of the novel, Soveida recalls the day her father returned from the hospital. In a sensitive and sensible passage, she describes the Luardo who returned to the Blue House, the way the Dosamantes used to refer to Mamá Lupita’s house. Sick and more dependent on his mother than ever before, Luardo seems to be going back to his mother’s womb, under her protection: “[n]o longer the robust, handsome, light-skinned man with the full-head of still-dark hair, the man so many women had loved, fought over, cried about, and cursed, Luardo was simply a man in a rented bed, trying to breathe, using all his willpower to go on [...] (p. 400).

Regarding Luardo’s characteristics, what marked Soveida the most or, at least, at a first moment, was the image of her father as a Latin lover. When she laid her eyes on the now frail Luardo, she automatically started comparing that man in a rent-a-bed to the strong good-looking man women used to strive for. The weakness she always knew was hidden behind his strong appearance was now being physically revealed. Soveida then goes on analyzing the father she knew as such, but whom she felt she never had:

Luardo was a multitude of men to me. All troubled. Sick. Without boundaries. Sometimes I recalled the inappropriate things Luardo had done to me: the penny arcades he subjected me to, the trips to Juárez to see strippers, the topless nightclub he took Mara and me when we were teenagers. I remembered him hurting Mara and then me [...] (p.402).

⁹ *Remolino*, in Spanish, means *whirl*, in a reference to the “circular movement” Luardo’s life is making in the chapter.

Although Soveida describes Luardo as “a multitude of men”, she spots a unique – and scaring – feature: no matter how many men he might have embodied all of them were troubled and sick. Way before narrating her father’s pitiful situation, Soveida provides the reader with a threatening version of Luardo. In the ninth chapter of the novel, Soveida, as a narrator, compares her father to a folkloric figure, present in many cultures, like the Mexican one, which is “the Boogeyman”, that is, an “eating beast” whichever semantic nuance that “eating” might take. In labeling her father that way, Soveida depicts Luardo as an evil creature, dissociating him from the paradigm of the father figure, from anything she could think of as sacred, like the religious Chicano culture teaches its members a father should be. In that chapter, the narrator/protagonist describes what she understands by “bad”, using as an example her own father:

To be bad was to be removed from holiness, that ever elusive state of grace. It was to be dissociated from the core of life, to be out of balance with the spirit. It was to be someone like may father, Luardo Dosamantes, a reckless, thoughtless, wastrel alcoholic. “Sin juicio”, said Dolores (p. 49).

In her final assessment of Luardo, Soveida asserts the legacy he left her: “[Luardo] taught me what love was through his lovelessness, and what loyalty was, and yes, trust, through his lack of both. Perhaps we learn the most valuable lessons from those we’ve ceased to understand” (p. 403). Even aware that Luardo is about to die, Soveida portrays him as he had always appeared to her. As she argues, Luardo was the “negative reference”, the one who taught her “not to behave like this”, “not to be like that”.

In turn, Dolores, one of the victims of Luardo’s irresponsible behavior, finally has “a happy end”. In the chapter that precedes “El Remolino”, entitled “Grandmothers, Mothers, Daughters”, once more, Soveida, as the novel’s narrator, gives voice to other characters. In the subdivision devoted to Dolores, a dialog between her and Mamá Lupita is reproduced. During the conversation, the Dosamantes’ matriarch shows dissatisfaction with the fact that Dolores is going to get married again, and with an Anglo, which Mamá Lupita strongly condemns. In a humorous line, with code switching sprinkled in, Soveida’s grandmother expresses her opinion towards Dolores’s second husband:

It all began with the new name. And the divorce. I should never have lived to see you take up with another man! To see you engaged, ay, non aguanto el dolor, to an **americano**. Diosito! [...]. Un desconocido. No es posible! Where does he come from? [...] **The color of an earthworm** [...] a retired barbón, fello y calvo [...] Reldon Claughbaugh! **His name’s like a family of insects** [...] I thought I’d never live to see you change your name, **Maria Dolores Dosamantes** [...] to become **Dolly Claughbaugh**. (p. 397, my emphasis).

Mamá Lupita’s evaluation of Dolores’s future husband shows a curious feature which could be here denominated “inverted racism”. While referring to Reldon Claughbaugh, she describes him as “an americano”. The author, through her narrator/protagonist’s writing, makes a point to write the word with a lower case initial, marking here the Spanish spelling. As the word appears within spoken discourse, it is

possible to infer that Chávez's orthographic option may be interpreted as an inversion in social position in which the author endows a Mexican old lady with a counterhegemonic discourse. Three elements in Mamá Lupita's line stand out: while describing Reldon's skin color, she compares him to "an earthworm", a negative and disgusting figure, rather than using a positive image to describe his complexion; again, in an attempt to criticize the man who is going to "steal Dolores from the Dosamantes's family", Mamá Lupita mocks the British sound of Reldon's name by connecting it to "a family of insects". She finally ties up her critical line by confirming Dolores's definite Anglicization – Maria Dolores Dosamantes was going to become Dolly Claughbaugh, as though, by adopting an English version of her name and adding a Gringo's surname, she would be erasing her Mexican heritage. About this issue in particular, Paula Moya explains that:

[t]he cultural nationalist emphasis on cultural survival within an Anglo-dominated society further instituted strict roles on the sexual autonomy of Chicanas. Chicanas who dated or married white men were often criticized as *vendidas* and *malinchistas*¹⁰, responsible for perpetuating the legacy of rape handed down to the Chicano community from the conquest of Mexico (MOYA, 2007, p. 57).

Mamá Lupita's criticism towards her former daughter-in-law for marrying a white man of European background can be interpreted as an attempt of cultural preservation. This way, it seems that the Dosamantes' matriarch is seeing Dolores as a betrayer, a *malinchista*.

However, regardless of any critical opinion the issues here discussed might bring about, it is undeniable that, perhaps with pedagogical purpose, Chávez reserved a gloomy ending to Luado and a happy one to Dolores. On the one hand, Luado, now physically weak, recovers his initial status of total dependence on his mother; on the other hand, Dolores, who learned since her childhood what pain – "dolor" – meant, managed to marry a non Mexican man, although, during Soveida's account, she never manifested such a will.

3) Soveida's Five Attempts to Find "The Perfect Partner".

If, up to the moment, characters in *Face of an Angel* were discussed in couples, now, they are going to be analysed in a hexagonal relation, each of them happening at one time. Since she was a teenager up to the moment she got pregnant, which presumably when she was around thirty, Soveida Dosamantes tries to have a successful loving relationship. The present subdivision intends to examine the romantic experiences which played an important role in the narrator/potagonist's maturity process. While discussing Soveida and her partners, the same way it was done in the previous subdivisions, we will address issues such as cultural identity, gender roles, family matters, recurrently represented in fictional works by Latina writers and analysed

¹⁰ A reference to the Mexican myth of La Malinche, a mistress of Hernan Cortes, a Spaniard conqueror, accused of being a traitor, for supposedly having facilitated the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards (ROSIANDANI, 2006, p. 21).

by Latina critics. Hence, what will be analysed herein is the sort of relationship that was established between the Soveida portrayed in the specific moment each of her lovers crossed her way. Therefore, along the present subdivision, different stages of the narrator/protagonist's development will come into play: a still naïve Soveida who interacts with Jester and Ivan Torres, a little more mature woman who passes through a traumatic situation with Veryl Beron, her second husband, and a plainly experienced and now learned Soveida who has a relationship with her two illegitimate cousins, Tirzio and J.V. Velásquez.

3.1) Soveida's Buffoon

Juan Alfredo Ramos entered Soveida's life when they were twenty and seventeen respectively. In spite of having a name and a surname, he was called and referred to as **Jester**¹¹. Except for his grandmother to whom he was "Yonny", anyone else used the name of the historically comic persona to refer to him. By making Jester a resident of a project house¹² (or housing project), Chávez informs her readers the social layer she placed him: that formed by people of immigrant background and/or who could be labeled as blue-collar. The passage in which Soveida comments on the difference in social conditions between the young couple is rich in cultural elements as the following excerpt demonstrates: "we never spoke much. He was the **pachuco from the other side of town**, the low-rider from the barrio, my Chiva Town boy, and I was la princesa, admired, **inaccessible**, and inexperienced, **a member of that once wealthy, still regal, family, the Dosamantes** [...]" (p.116). The narrator/protagonist uses the kind of offensive term "pachuco"¹³ to allude to her first (unofficial, as she herself defines him) boyfriend. By employing such a term, Soveida informs the way Chicano families of higher walks of life saw guys like Jester, who came from "the other side of town", that is, the poor side. In contrast, Soveida refers to herself as a girl of "noble" background whose family had lost, at least a great deal of, if not all the fortune they once had. In other words, for all reasons, the couple here focused on had distinct backgrounds.

By creating such a clashing pair whose unique point of contact is their Mexican ancestry, Denise Chávez reproduces in her fictional work the heterogeneity that characterizes not only Chicano community but any other ethnic group. Through the economic and social differences between Soveida and Jester, Chávez manages to prove wrong the U.S. mainstream pasteurized idea of a cohesive group, made up of a consistent blending of different sources: the specious concept of "melting pot".

In that very chapter, Soveida recalls a passage taken place in the nearby drive-in. It was when Jester tried to force her to have sex while Doctor Zhivago was being

¹¹ A man employed in the past by a ruler to entertain people with jokes, stories etc. - Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2006, p. 868.

¹² A publicly funded and administered housing development, usually for low-income families - <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/housing+project>

¹³ A Mexican-American youth or teenager, especially one who dresses in flamboyant clothes and belongs to a neighborhood gang. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/pachuco>

projected onto the screen. As a narrator, at the moment she is weaving her memories, Soveida reflects over Jester's attitude and her own feelings and compares herself to the movie's protagonist:

There was nothing exciting or sexy about the way Jester treated me, nothing personal or even real. I was dissociated from my feelings, as the poor unwitting Lara had. Trapped by an older, selfish lover, she hardly recognized her own haunted face in a shadowy mirror. Why had this night go so wrong? I liked Jester and he had once liked me. But now I no longer existed. I was Jester's plaything without a voice. (p. 119)

Towards the end of the chapter, Soveida narrates that Jester headed for California with an older woman who "[would] let him make love to her the way he wanted" (p. 121). As a narrator, already mature, Soveida takes stock of her experience with Jester and comes to the conclusion that her experience with him, even casually, had a pedagogical effect. Long before Luardo, Jester was the first to teach her about the male model produced by a patriarchal society (not necessarily Chicano community): "I now realize that Jester had taught me well. He prepared me for rude men, crude men, the one without shame, who use women like me and then discard us when they're done" (p. 121). Soveida's experience with Jester was her first experience of abandonment.

3.2) Ivan Torres: "The One"

Throughout *Face of an Angel*, Soveida's feelings for Ivan Torres, her first husband, ranged from some sort of adoration to abhorrence, as the excerpts below demonstrate:

To a small-town girl like me [Ivan Torres] was **the city personified: glamour, and effortless elegance**. [...] **There was a glowing naturalness about the way he did things**, he seemed so **self-assured** and **able to cope**. All the men I ever knew seemed helpless brats, incompetent in the matters of the world, and selfish by comparison (p. 129, my emphasis).

My love for [Ivan Torres] was for like **a bad toothache**: you want to save the tooth, but the minute-to-minute pain was so bad you just wanted the tooth out, gone, rather than endure **a deep, continual, nagging distress**. It had been **a beautiful tooth, too, with a decayed center no one could see. The smile was so bright** (p.188).

In the chapter "The One", Ivan was, as Soveida herself admits it, the personification of what she then conceived as perfection. Impressed by Ivan's elegant posture and leftist discourse, aligned with the 1960's anti-imperialist wave, Soveida becomes completely smitten with that sophisticated figure. It was during a chat – or rather, a pamphleteering monologue – that Soveida heard for the first time the term "Chicano". In contrast, in the twenty-seventh, "The House on Manzanares Street" – a clear reference to Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* –, Soveida, by using humor, compares her marriage to the unbearable pain a toothache can provoke. The interesting aspect of the analogy Soveida makes is that, although she could not stand the

suffering Ivan's infidelity triggered, she wanted to keep their marriage, hoping it was just a phase. In the twenty-fifth chapter, "Here is My Enemy", Soveida, as a narrator, reflects over the reason why Ivan had turned out to be a careless husband, attributing Ivan's behavior to the sort of upbringing he had had. According to Soveida's account, Ivan was an upper-class Mexican- American, who grew up in California. It was there that he became an adult and used his good appearance along with his financial situation to get as many women as he wanted to, as Soveida herself evaluates: "Ivan was already a man, and [...] was turned to **the world's expectations** of what a man should be: a lover of women par excellence, managing the difficult as one would **animals** or **underlings** (p. 175, my emphasis)". As Soveida argues, Ivan's unfaithfulness was the product of social paradigms that made people see women as "animals" or, at least, people always in an underprivileged position. The imbalance between the positions occupied by men and women in Chicano society is what U.S. scholar Phillipa Kafka (2000) calls "inequitable gendered power relations". Referring to critics Adela de La Torre and Beátriz Pesquera, Kafka states that "most Chicana writers' major concerns and themes focus on the ideological manipulation of Chicanas into political and sexual domination and exploitation, or as I put it, into inequitable power relations [...]" (KAFKA, 2000, p. xxi). In creating a character like Ivan, Chávez intends to show that, although education is truly the key tool to transform society, some cultural constructions are so fossilized that it is necessary much more than academic learning to change this scenario. The same Ivan that showed political awareness in the nineteenth chapter and sowed in Soveida the first seed of Chicano consciousness, was the one that spent nights away from home with a collection of lovers. In other words, despite his having access to college education in a time that traditional values were being questioned, Ivan, in his everyday life with Soveida, perpetuated the old gender role that he probably criticized as an activist in the 1960's.

While reflecting over the reasons why Ivan turned out to be practically the same macho as her father and grandfather had been, Soveida, as a narrator, finds in the familial structure Ivan Torres was raised in the reason for his behavior. Son of a real state agent who "had left his widow a fortune" (p. 175), Ivan grew up without knowing the meaning of "needing to earn money". Having always had a comfortable life in material terms, he spent a great deal of his life in California, a place that "matured him" (p. 175) and had endowed him with sophisticated habits. Ivan then had only two concerns in life: studying and spending nights with women, "mistresses from all walks of life, of all ages, and all creeds" (p. 175). What is more curious is that Soveida, while analyzing Ivan as a man and as a husband, blames her former mother-in-law, Lourdes Fonseca Torres, for Ivan's irresponsible behavior. As Soveida argues, Lourdes, besides having "babied both father and son" (p. 175), passed on to Ivan a futile way of life, since she spent her days "shopping and applying make up" (p. 175). Although Ivan does not act as the traditional oppressive Chicano family man, he disrespects Soveida by coming back home late without even giving her a call. While encouraging Soveida either to go visiting her mother or to go out with Lizzie, Soveida's lifelong best friend, Ivan apparently establishes an open and understanding relationship with her. However,

he knows that a visit paid to Dolores or a ride with Lizzie will calm Soveida down and will not put at risk the role of faithful wife that was culturally built and reserved for her to play. Besides, it is he, Ivan, that, one way or another, allows Soveida to go out without him, and, by suggesting whom she should visit or go out with, establishes the limits of her “freedom”. By using an apparently sympathetic discourse, Ivan knows that he can effectively control Soveida’s will and actions. About gender roles in Chicano society, Saldívar-Hull (2000) explains that “[...] Chicano and Mexican culture [...]enforce women’s obedience. [...] [T]he family structure is based on masculinist notions that emphasize men’s supposedly natural superiority and authority over women” (SALDÍVAR-HULL, 2000, p. 30).

Regarding the duos Soveida-Jester and Soveida-Ivan, it is interesting to observe that, under a social perspective, by comparison, the relational positions of each character is curiously opposite. If Soveida was the inaccessible princess to Jester – the undesirable pachuco, the smelly “Indio” –, in relation to Ivan Torres, she was the waitress – whose job is **serving** – in El Farol, the restaurant Soveida worked at all her life and where Ivan and his family were regulars. The social aspect did not make any difference between the couples: both Jester and Ivan walked out on Soveida anyway. This somehow proves that manifestations of machismo may occur in Chicano society regardless of the social layer the Chicano macho belongs to.

3.3) Veryl Beron: Weakness and Paranoia Personified by a Gringo

If the first two love experiences Soveida had had were with Chicanos, in the thirty-first chapter of *Face of an Angel*, the reader will be told about the narrator/protagonist’s only relationship with a white Anglo. According to Soveida’s narrative, Veryl Beron embodies “a collection of weird characteristics”, which could be interpreted as a subversive manoeuvre by Chávez, in order to deconstruct the image of the superior and perfect Anglo.

After a year of relationship, despite the strangeness that had been marking it, “one night [...] after **trying** to make love, he asked Soveida to marry him” (p. 229, my emphasis). As it seems, unexpectedness and contradiction are Veryl’s hallmarks, or else, marriage, to him, might be connected with sexual abstinence. As it seems, while conceiving a character, Caucasian, cultured – when Soveida met Veryl, he was reading *The Red and the Black*, by Stendhal –, but impotent, Chávez engendered a counterpart of the Latin lover, a stereotype embodied by the Chicano characters in the novel. Throughout Soveida’s narrative, Veryl reveals many aspects of a sick personality. At one point of the narrative, Soveida gets a severe flu and needs to stay away from work in order to recover. Due to Soveida’s convalescence, Veryl develops a critical paranoia which prevents him from sleeping with her, as he is afraid of getting sick too. Soveida’s health recovery, however, was quite difficult, as Veryl, for stinginess, refuses to turn on the heating system.

Veryl's fate is sealed by himself: right after Thanksgiving, on their wedding anniversary, Veryl commits suicide choking himself with a plastic bag. In the narrative, the scene in which Soveida describes her finding Veryl's corpse is meaningful and moving: "[Veryl] was so beautiful. So beautiful. I rocked back and forth, holding him in my arms, like holding a child, crying in a little voice already strangely familiar, as if I'd already known the song. I held him in my arms, a sorrowful Pietà, my heart chiseled in stone" (p. 260).

In a detailed analysis of *Face of an Angel*'s narrative structure, Naranjo-Huebl (2007) reflects over the meaning of Veryl as a character in the novel. As Naranjo-Huebl argues, Soveida and Veryl's episode is inserted in the part of the novel entitled "Virtues"¹⁴, "those angels who protect the good, help people fight temptation, frustrate demonic assaults, and bestow blessings" (NARANJO-HUEBL, 2007, p. 61). Taking into consideration all Soveida experienced by Veryl's side, it seems reasonable to conclude that it was the narrator/protagonist's intention to protect a good man – according to her feelings about him – who, for some reason, was facing psychological problems. From the very first moment she laid her eyes on Veryl, Soveida, a sensitive angel – the angel referred to in the title of the novel –, detected that "[t]here was something about [him], even then, that [she] loved" (p. 223). Perhaps, Soveida had somehow sensed that Veryl was "a misguided Christ figure" (NARANJO-HUEBL, 2007, p. 61) in need of protection and proper guidance. Not by chance, Chávez reproduced in the scene in which Soveida rocks Veryl's dead body, the image represented by *La Pietà*, Michelangelo's famous work of art. Veryl's physically and psychologically sick condition required Soveida's love and pity (*pietà*, in Italian), as NARANJO-HUEBL herself asserts: "[t]he last image of the chapter ["A Heart of Chiseled Stone"] has Soveida as a brokenhearted Mary, inconsolable in her loss" (NARANJO-HUEBL, 2007, p. 61).

3.4) J.V. and Tirzio Velásquez: Closing a (Illegitimate) Family Cycle.

After Veryl's death, Soveida decides to enroll at a course on Chicano culture, the first reference of which is shown at the end of the thirty-seventh chapter. As her teacher, she has J.V. Velasquez whom she later finds out that is her half-cousin, son to Manuel Mejía Velásquez, illegitimate son of Profetario Dosamantes, Soveida's grandfather. In the forty-third chapter of the novel, humorously entitled "J.V. and the Metal Pin" – a reference to his erect physical posture, as if he had a large metal pin installed inside his body –, Soveida outlines a rich picture of her teacher, cousin and, later, lover. In the third paragraph of that very chapter, the narrator/protagonist attributes to J.V., which partly explains his arrogance:

Velásquez got his undergraduate degree at Standford University. That accounted for his **Chicano aloofness**. He spent a full year studying in England and that explained **his disdain**

¹⁴ *Face of an Angel* is divided into parts named after categories of angels. It starts from "Angels" – the most distant from God – and ends in "Seraphim" – the closest to God – in a reference to the narrator/protagonist's maturing process.

for anything common. He returned to the U.S. and received his master's degree and doctorate from [...] one of the best sociology departments in the country. That explained **his brilliant mind** and **his intellectual prowess** and **his inability to understand the real world of Agua Oscura, New Mexico.** To look at him – tall, thin, with a handsome, intense face – was to be startled into understanding that **culture has nothing to do with education** (p. 322 – my emphasis).

From the description given by Soveida, it is possible to infer that the man she is depicting bears a deeply contradictory personality. Since he specializes in Chicano culture, he was supposed not only to understand it under a scholarly perspective, but, above all, to identify with the cultural practices of the community he belongs to. On the contrary, he bears what Soveida calls “Chicano aloofness” and is unable “to understand the real world of Agua Oscura”. From the narrator/protagonist's text, it is possible to conclude that, after a long period away from the provincial Agua Oscura, J.V. became another man thanks to the influence of the cosmopolitan and cultured environment of Stanford, one of the most important US universities. J.V., as a character, can be read as the personification of the “provisional subject” Stuart Hall (2007) talks about. Based on Soveida's narrative, the reader comes to the conclusion that the academic knowledge J.V. acquired in California and in England disrupted the bonds that once existed between Soveida's teacher/half-cousin/lover and Chicano community. Once J.V. became a learned man, he undid the “stitches” that “sutured” him to the cultural structure he originally came from, “[de]estabiliz[ing] both [his] subject and the cultural world [he] inhabit[ed], making both [less] [...] united [...]”, to use in a reverse way Hall's words (HALL, 2007, p. 598).

While talking about J.V., Chávez, through Soveida's voice, again spots in family the reason for a character's behavior. The narrator/protagonist then describes a scene of domestic violence that J.V., witnesses along with his older brother Tirzio: their father, Soveida's grandfather's illegitimate son, beats their mother up after an argument. The two brothers had different attitudes towards the regrettable episode: whereas Tirzio, the older, tried to interfere, “J.V. ran to his room and locked himself up” (p. 324). Perhaps, this subject remained locked up for keeps, not only inside his sorrow for living in a violent home but also within his academic knowledge and position, as Soveida argues: “[t]he greatest mission of J.V. Velásquez's life was to rise above the poverty-ridden, intellectual and cultural void of his childhood and his family. He longed to be independent from his culture's expectations of him” (p. 323). Thus, by embodying the image of the intellectual, J.V. tries to escape the stereotyped rude Chicano macho. However, by charging perfection from Soveida as a student and “not supervis[ing] her studies with humility, but condescendingly respond[ing] to her work”, as Naranjo-Huebl (p. 62) observes, J.V. assumes a similar controlling position.

If, on the one hand, it was J.V.'s “Chicano aloofness” and “lack of emotionalism” and Soveida's sarcastic attitude towards him that drew these characters together, on the other, it was physical attraction that caused Soveida's and Tirzio's paths to cross. In the forty-seventh chapter, there is an interesting comparison of the two brothers in a passage that narrates a car ride J.V., Soveida and Tirzio took. In a

mocking comment on J.V.'s looks, Tirzio teases his brother by saying that he is hiding behind his sunglasses, bearing a "Californian movie-star aloofness" (p. 350), a man who is in for only "intellectual pendejas" (p. 348): "'Who are you?'" Tirzio would ask. 'The man with no eyes? I never know what you are thinking. Do you ever see the whites of his eyes, Soveida? Just what are you hiding, Velásquez?' "(p. 350).

In contrast, now seen under Soveida's lens, Tirzio is the one with "dark, absolutely open and honest eyes", that is, the one whose thoughts and soul are flagrantly revealed. Again taking into consideration the dualism of education and culture, it seems reasonable to see the enigmatic J.V. as a distorted product of education, who became a broken off individual. Perhaps, by wearing sunglasses, as Tirzio acutely observed, J.V. might be hiding the Chicano portion of his "self", which he intends to erase. Tirzio, in his turn, would be the genuine Chicano, the one whose cultural identity remained untouched by formal education or the simple desire of being what he is not, as Soveida herself defines him: "I had never known or loved a man like Tirzio. He should be listed in the Chicano Culture Quiz as something truly great" (p. 354).

At the end of the fifty-ninth chapter, in a dialog with her nun friend Lizzie, Soveida reveals to be pregnant, something she tells Tirzio only two chapters later. Unlike the traditional model of a mistress, mainly regarding it within the Chicano society, Soveida does not expect that Tirzio will leave his family to start a new one with her. As Soveida herself concludes, "[Tirzio] was a man who loved children, **but he could not love** this child[;] [h]e was a person who believed in family, **but not in this one**" (p. 456, my emphasis). By deciding to assume her child on her own, Soveida breaks the pattern of the mistress that spends all her life hoping to become "the official wife". Reflecting over her own situation, Soveida indirectly evokes women who, one way or another, got hold of their own destinies, women who refused to accept to remain in the sufferer's position, as McCracken points out while discussing Ana Castillo's novel *So Far From God*: "transcended the role of victims [and took] strong measures to control their lives with both large and small acts" (McCRACKEN, 1999, p. 38):

I wish I had been able to talk to someone about Tirzio. Sister Lizzie, Mamá, Dolores, Mara, all women I might have talked to were busy, deeply occupied with their lives. I wanted to say that I hurt the way they had all hurt" (p. 455).

Based on the trajectory of the characters mentioned by Soveida and also on her own, it seems correct to assert that they, in a way or another, "recenter" – to apply here a verb used by Saldívar-Hull – the nuances of the Chicana figure each of them represents. Considering Soveida's route in the novel, first of all, her working outside home (even not needing it to survive, as she belonged to a middle class family), her loving experiences, her enrolment (and engagement) in the course on Chicano culture, Rosiandani (2006) concludes:

[t]he redefinition of the feminine role undertaken by Soveida is found in her disobedience, in her demand to be treated equally in the marital relationship, in the fact she has access to education and in her gaining economic independence by working outside the house (ROSIANDANI, 2006, p. 27).

In conclusion, it is possible to infer that, by using gender confrontation as her springboard, Denise Chávez, through her narrator/protagonist's voice, reproduces a microcosm of Chicano society. Throughout Soveida's account, profiles of couples are delineated, whose components can be grouped in weak men and strong women, except for Manuel Dosamantes and Elena Harrell, the matrices of the narrator/protagonist's lineage. It seems that the author, by conceiving such characters, intended to create a sort of "creation myth", which derived the Dosamantes family. In spite of embodying such a perfect combination, Elena Harrell and Manuel Dosamantes did not succeed in passing on to their descendants the harmonic relationship they kept all their lives. If the Dosamantes' founders represent the ideal couple, the other gender combinations, let us put it this way, were not as successful. Despite being preceeded by another unhappy couple – Mamá Lupita and her husband, Profetario Dosamantes, the couple whose troubled relationship was focused on in the novel, was Luardo Dosamantes and Dolores, the narrator/protagonist's parents. Based on Soveida's, the reader infers that Luardo and Dolores's marriage epitomizes a Chicano traditional marriage: on the one hand, there is the unfaithful husband whose behavior is marked by irresponsibility in all senses and, on the other, there is the conformist wife who goes on suffering for the sake of her family. Throughout the novel, the reader sees Luardo as the stronger and powerful element, while to Dolores there is no option but to take care of him, even after their divorce. However, it is the female part that manages to overcome the effects of an unhappy – and traumatic in some cases – relationship: Dolores married again, while the dying Luardo returned to his mother's house (womb, metaphorically speaking) and Soveida, after five frustrated attempts to start a family in the conventional sense of the term, decides to be a single mother on her own. Therefore, Denise Chávez uses Soveida Dosamantes's self-referential discourse to discuss a point largely focused on by Chicana writers, whether in critical articles or in fictional/poetic production: traditional Mexican family values. If a comparison is made between Mamá Lupita's, Dolores's and Soveida's trajectories, it will be possible to detect some sort of evolution. If Mamá Lupita accepted in silence her husband unfaithfulness, Dolores put an end to Luardo's mischievous and irresponsible behavior. Soveida, in her turn, after her five unsuccessful relationships, decides to go back to her grandmother's house in order to continue the Dosamantes's lineage, but by herself. Chávez then conceives Soveida Dosamantes who, in spite of descending from a family whose female members were raised to work as "mothers, submissive wives, custodians of the unity of the family and the community" (OLIVER-ROTGER, 2003, p. 110), follows a course marked by autonomy and freedom. By doing so, the author elaborates a family saga, at the end of which the narrator/protagonist subverts all the roles imposed on women not only by men, but by other women who, even unconsciously, perpetuate a cultural system that subjugates them all.

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