

Telenovelas in Chicano Writing: A Multidimensional Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the different ways in which the Latin American soap opera – the *telenovela* – is represented in Chicano/a literature. The writers Sandra Cisneros, John Rechy and María Amparo Escandón portray diverse types of female viewers, refusing to present them as gullible stereotypes. By rejecting a one-dimensional perspective which views the *telenovela* as simply degrading and manipulative, the writers discussed herein draw attention to its many layers of meaning and to its role in the creation of a transnational Mexican / Chicano identity.

Keywords: *telenovelas*, Chicano/a literature, Mexican popular culture, transnationalism, Sandra Cisneros, John Rechy, María Amparo Escandón.

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza distintos modos de ver el género de la telenovela en la literatura chicana. Los escritores Sandra Cisneros, John Rechy y María Amparo Escandón muestran los diferentes tipos de televidentes femeninas y rechazan como único enfoque la idea extendida de que tales espectadoras son sujetos fácilmente manipulables. Al introducir nuevas formas de analizar esta problemática, estos autores tratan de resaltar la complejidad de esta realidad aparentemente superficial. Asimismo, ponen de manifiesto la contribución de la telenovela en la creación de una identidad transnacional chicana / mexicana.

Palabras clave: telenovelas, literatura chicana, cultura popular mexicana, transnacionalismo, Sandra Cisneros, John Rechy, María Amparo Escandón.

Mexican immigrants maintain their main connection with that marvellous,
imaginary country called Mexico via soap operas.
(Gómez-Peña, 1998: 133)

1. Introduction

The representation of Mexican popular culture is currently the focus of much Chicano/a writing. In the work of Gloria Anzaldúa or Sandra Cisneros art forms, such as folk stories, are articulated as counter-narratives to official versions of history and culture, as well as expressions that assert a Chicano / Mexican culture. Another popular culture art form that regularly appears in Chicano/a writing is the *telenovela* – the Latin American soap opera. *Telenovelas* play an important role in the lives of some Latino characters and often help form their cultural identity. This article analyses the diverse ways in which this genre is represented and its engagement with socio-cultural aspects. Possibly because of its mass culture status, *telenovela* is not generally regarded as an art form that takes on questions of history or gender consciousness. However, in the work of some Chicano writers, *telenovelas* are posited as a vital part of Chicanos' transnational identity, suggesting that this popular genre should be perceived as something more significant than a television serial.

The diverse writings of Sandra Cisneros, John Rechy, and María Amparo Escandón offer different perspectives on this art form. Whilst occasionally portraying it as degrading, they also highlight its linguistic and cultural dimensions and demonstrate its capacity to empower the viewer.

2. *Telenovelas'* Background

To describe a *telenovela* as simply the Latin American equivalent of the soap opera does not reflect the socio-political and cultural significance of this melodramatic art form. According to Ana M. López (1995: 256), *telenovelas* «[...] are the basic staple of all Latin American TV programming (day- and prime-time), of Spanish-language programming in the US [...]». Rowe and Schelling (1991) and Martín-Barbero (1995) trace the origins of the *telenovela* to the 19th century melodramatic forms of the theatre and the newspaper serial. The *folletín*, or newspaper serial, consisted of a «[...] story written in episodes and series. The “open structure” of a tale written day-to-day, carried out according to a plan but open to the influence of its readers' reaction, propitiated the (con)fusion of fiction and life» (Martín-Barbero, 1995: 277). According to Rowe and Schelling (1991: 109), «folktales, Brazilian *cordel* literature, and the chronicle of events in *corrido* and Colombian *vallenato* songs» are also related to the birth of the *telenovela*. Latin American, and especially Mexican, melodramatic cinema also played an important role in its formation. Carlos Monsiváis (1994: 16) states: «Lo que el cine inicia la televisión lo finiquita. El melodrama clásico conoce su metamorfosis terminal en telenovelas, radionovelas y fotonovelas».

Monsiváis (1994: 18) argues that «Exceso y *grand-guignol*» are the two components of this genre. In contrast to the soap operas in Britain and the US, *telenovelas* usually run for a few months only and have a definite ending. Although there exist stylistic differences between, for instance, a Mexican and a Venezuelan *telenovela*, they all tend to contain unrealistic plots and excessive drama. Expanding on Mexican *telenovelas*, Monsiváis (1994: 13) discusses the type of plots that they usually deal with:

De variantes de la Cenicienta y de Blanca Nieves, [...] de la joven que llegó a la ciudad pobre y descalza y se vuelve rica y famosa, del joven a quien le insinúan que su madre podría ser negra o podría no haberlo concebido, de la hechicera que regresa cuatro siglos después de vengarse y se enamora de un descendiente de sus inquisidores [...].

An interesting aspect of *telenovelas* is the capacity for export, not only within Latin America but also to countries like the United States, Spain, Italy, France, Russia or China (see Balwin (1995) on the success of the 1970s Mexican *telenovela* *Los ricos también lloran* in Russia during the 1990s). This ensures that *telenovelas* nowadays represent not only Latin American television but a Latin American identity around the world. This is also Martín-Barbero's (1995: 281) argument, who states that *telenovelas* play an important role «[...] in the production and reproduction of the images Latin American peoples make of themselves [...]». Jorge González (1992: 60) states the significance of *telenovela* worldwide in no uncertain terms: «[*telenovelas*] are together with the Boom writers, the most current and vital cultural product that Latin American countries export to the world and share among themselves. [...] [It] is particularly important for studying those "cultural matrices" which make up much of Latin America collective identity [...]».

The fact that a Mexican *telenovela* can be watched across the whole of Latin America contributes to the creation of a pan-Latin American identity. But as noted by Martín-Barbero (1995), this also means that specific national qualities have to be softened in favour of a more exportable product:

Soap opera production has meant, in turn, a certain appropriation of the genre by each country, that is, its nationalization. On the other hand, [it] implies rigid stereotypes in its dramatic outline and strong conditioning elements in its visual grammar, as required and reinforced by the logic of a market with increasingly transnational tendencies.¹ (Martín-Barbero, 1995: 282)

1. According to López (1985, 1995), the main countries that create *telenovelas* are Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and Venezuela, being TV-Globo (Brazil) and Televisa (Mexico) two of the main producers.

The exportability of *telenovelas* becomes obvious in the US market, where there exists a substantial Latino audience. Elizabeth Fox (1997: 38) claims that as early as the 1960s «Televisa's owners bought TV stations in Texas, California and New York [...]». This market has not only exported Latin American soap operas but it has also, according to López (1995: 265), led to the production of US – made *telenovelas* that dealt with the experiences of Latinos as «[...] a hodgepodge of exiles and immigrants in various stages of assimilation».

Mirroring the debates surrounding the soap opera in Britain and in the US, some critics defend the *telenovela* as an art form that incorporates feminist and resistant subtexts. One of the critics who perceives subversion in *telenovelas* is Linda Craft (1990: 197), who argues that «The *telenovela*, like the testimonial novel, forms part of a literature of resistance especially if one considers those texts that are, for the most part, written by and directed by women». Even though the texts discussed herein do not provide such an optimistic interpretation, they articulate *telenovelas* as complex popular cultural expressions that can be interpreted from different perspectives. Writing about the impact of *telenovelas* in Brazil Tufte broadly maintains that «Commercial exploitation [and] ideological “guidance”» take place to some extent in *telenovelas*, although they also «reflect the cultural characteristics of, and concerns arising from the disruptions present in the complex societies of today» (Tufte, 2000: 4). This multi-faceted dimension of *telenovelas* is revealed in the writings of Cisneros, Rechy and Escandón, as, depending on the viewer, *telenovelas* can be both manipulative and empowering.

3. Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* and *Telenovelas*

Mexican popular culture and, in particular, *telenovelas* are an important part of the female protagonists' lives in Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991). In the story «Woman Hollering Creek», Cleófilas moves from Mexico to Texas to marry Juan Pedro and start a new, supposedly economically better life. This new life unwittingly includes a wife-battering husband and a solitary existence, which ultimately leads her back to Mexico with her six «good-for-nothing brothers» (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 43) and father. The text shows that Cleófilas' expectations regarding marriage and life have been defined by the narratives taking place in popular art forms such as *telenovelas*, romance novels or songs:

But what Cleófilas has been waiting for, has been whispering and sighing and giggling for, has been anticipating since she was old enough to lean against the window displays of gauze and butterflies and lace, is passion. [...] passion in its purest crystalline essence. The kind the books and songs and *telenovelas* describe when

one finds, finally, the great love of one's life, and does whatever one can, must do, at whatever the cost.

Tú o Nadie. «You or No One.» The title of the current favorite telenovela. The beautiful Lucía Méndez having to put up with all kinds of hardships of the heart, separation and betrayal, and loving, always loving no matter what, because *that* is the most important thing, and did you see Lucía Méndez on the Bayer aspirin commercials – wasn't she lovely? Does she dye her hair do you think? Cleófilas is going to go to the *farmacia* [sic] and buy a hair rinse; her girlfriend Chela will apply it – it's not that difficult at all. (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 44)

This passage does not only express that the media presents reductive role models for Mexican working-class women like Cleófilas, but that it also attempts to turn them into consumers.² Thus, when her husband hits her for the first time, «[...] she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away as she imagined when she saw such things in the *telenovelas*» (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 47).

Despite having seen the *telenovelas'* female characters «fight back» when faced with a similar situation, Cleófilas does not follow their example. The events related in this passage stand out against Craft's (1990: 204) idea that «[...] soap opera engages in some consciousness-raising which some would regard as subversive and destructive of hearth and home should the woman decide she no longer wants to tolerate the chaos or abuse there». Instead, this case exemplifies Modleski's (1984: 112) argument regarding the contradictory nature of mass art: «while appearing to be merely escapist, [it] simultaneously challenges and reaffirms traditional values, behaviours, and attitudes». Although Cleófilas may have seen the women retaliate against patriarchal oppression in the *telenovelas*, she has also been instructed «to suffer for love [...]. The pain all sweet somehow» (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 45).

Though a fan of *telenovelas*, Cleófilas is deprived of this entertainment in the US as she cannot afford a television set. When her husband is away, she watches some episodes at her neighbour Soledad's, who «[...] was often kind enough to retell what had happened on what episode of *María de Nadie* [...]» (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 52). Without *telenovelas*, the protagonist turns towards the romance novels written by Corín Tellado. Tellado is a popular Spanish writer, renowned for writing romances with Cinderella-style plots resembling *telenovelas'* screenplays. The conservative themes in Tellado's novels suggest, according to Méndez (1986: 31), that «woman can only realize

2. Lucía Méndez is a famous Mexican singer and actress of *telenovelas*, and according to López (1995: 267), «a favorite of Televisa's novelas». She has worked in *telenovelas* such as *Tú o nadie* (1985), *Marielena* (1992) and *Amor de nadie* (1990). See <<http://www.luciamendez.com>>.

her true self through marriage». This critic also maintains that the luxurious settings are reminiscent of fairy stories and thus «[...] abstracted from history and from class struggle» (Méndez, 1986: 32); furthermore, «the United States is presented as a land of promise in which the individual may get ahead with relative ease» (Méndez, 1986: 33). Considering this, we can assume that the Tellado romances have not only *lured* Cleófilas into the US but also persuaded her to accept the role of submissive wife. Cisneros narrates the protagonist's affection for Tellado romances: «He had thrown a book. Hers. From across the room. A hot welt across the cheek. She could forgive that. But what stung more was the fact it was her book, a love story by Corin Tellado, what she loved most now that she lived in the US, without a television set, without the *telenovelas*» (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 52).

As Sonia Saldívar-Hull (1999) notes in her enlightening discussion of this short story, Cleófilas is attacked with the same object that instructs her «to loving no matter what» (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 44). Thus, Cisneros suggests that her husband's violence and oppression is tolerated, at least in part, because of the unrealistic and romantic ideals sustained in mass cultural texts.

In «Woman Hollering Creek», *telenovelas* are posited as one of many narratives that comply with the dominant ideology. However, Cisneros offers a more constructive message in another short story from the same volume: soap operas are also present in the life of the female protagonist in «*Bien Pretty*», who, on this occasion, portrays a rather responsive viewer. The protagonist Lupe begins to watch *telenovelas* to counteract her sadness when abandoned by her lover, who has to return to Mexico to his two wives and kids. Her life is reduced to work, rushing back home and stocking up on Mexican food so «[she] could be seated in front of the screen in time to watch *Rosa Salvaje* with Verónica Castro [...] Or Daniela Romo in *Balada por un Amor*. Or Adela Noriega in *Dulce Desafío*. I watched them all (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 161). But instead of embracing the *telenovela* female protagonists as role models who suffer in the name of love as Cleófilas did, Lupe realises that they are not «real women»:

I started dreaming of these Rosas and Briandas and Luceros. And in my dreams I'm slapping the heroine to her senses, because I want them to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to. Not loves that are *tormentosos*. Not men powerful and passionate versus women either volatile and evil, or sweet and resigned. But women. Real women. The ones I've loved all my life. *If you don't like it* lárgate, honey. Those women. The ones I've known everywhere except on TV, in books and magazines. Las girlfriends. *Las comadres* [female friends]. Our mamas and *tías*. Passionate and powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And, above all, fierce. (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 161)

Although Lupe enjoys watching the dramatic plots of *telenovelas*, she is also capable of questioning the patriarchal message within them. In this way, Cisneros presents an alternative spectator to Cleófilas, and suggests that women are not always passive, easily manipulated viewers. Fiske (1995: 45-46) makes a similar point when he maintains that, whilst the dominant popular art forms can manipulate consumers, they can also be resisted: «[...] the dominant cannot control totally the meanings that the people may construct, the social allegiances they may form. The people are not the helpless subjects of an irresistible ideological system, but neither are they free-willed, biologically determined individuals».

Instead of perceiving the *telenovelas* characters as potential role models, Lupe sees them as anti-role models, as examples not to follow. Thus, Lupe's perception of the characters is utterly counter to that which the *telenovela*'s producers intended to communicate. Tufte (2000: 19) argues a similar case when he states that ideological dominance is not always obtained, since «any type of culture product is always interpreted and reinterpreted on a personal level, in ways dependent on a series of socio-cultural, psychological, economical, political and historical factors». In «*Bien Pretty*», rejecting the reductive message of *telenovelas* also involves disallowing the message arising from some Mexican popular music. Lupe refuses to listen to «[...] Lola Beltrán sobbing “*Soy infeliz*” into her four cervezas» in favour of a more empowering song by Daniela Romo: «“*Ya no. Es verdad que te adoro, pero más me adoro yo.*” I love you, honey, but I love me more».³ (*Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*: 163). Her empowering subjectivity is replicated in the theme of the songs she chooses to listen to.

In her short stories, Cisneros presents two types of mass culture female consumer: one is easily distracted by *telenovelas* and romances and is apathetic towards the patriarchal oppression she experiences; whilst the other is able to enjoy popular art forms, but is also capable of responding to its ideology. In this way, the Chicana author rejects a one-dimensional view in favour of a more comprehensive understanding of these entertaining popular culture art forms.

4. Rechy's Vision in *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*

Another Chicano writer who explores the phenomenon of the *telenovela* is John Rechy in his novel *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1991).⁴

3. Lola Beltrán (1932-1996) was a popular Mexican singer of *rancheras*. In her famous song «*Soy infeliz*», the heart-broken female protagonist drowns her sorrows in alcohol.

4. John Rechy is a Chicano writer best known for his novels of homosexual subject matter, such as *City of Night* (1963), the novel with which he became recognized. Due to a lack of ethnic focus in his work,

Described by the author as a novel that «[...] extends into surrealism, and then into fable» (Castillo, 1995: 119), the text depicts a day in the life of a Mexican-American woman, Amalia Gómez, in Los Angeles. The novel begins by showing Amalia's bewilderment when she sees a «[...] large silver cross in the otherwise clear sky» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 3) one May morning, and she wonders whether it is a miraculous sign. The text shows Amalia's pilgrimage through Los Angeles and the distressing news she receives that day: she successively discovers that her son is a male hustler, that her daughter has become an aggressive woman, and that Amalia's new partner has made sexual advancements to her daughter. The upsetting events of the day awaken Amalia's memories of the death of her son Manny, as well as other painful episodes from her life, retold in a series of flashbacks.

Disheartened and angered by the sequence of tragic events that comprise her life, Amalia visits different individuals and places looking for support and solace. Frustrated and angered by the miserable life she has had, Amalia demands a miracle from the Virgin Mary. At the end of the novel her wish is granted as she believes that she has witnessed a miracle. Thus, the novel ends by revealing a confident Amalia who, after finally obtaining the redemption she had sought so desperately, finds the strength to face new challenges and problems.

In this text, the mass media is portrayed as an important part of Latinas' lives: the mass cultural art form of the *telenovela* constitutes a vehicle that enables women to escape from the hardships of reality. Rechy presents a very critical approach towards the *telenovela* as he depicts it as degrading and manipulative. His critique is manifested through the detailed description of the plot of Amalia's «cherished Saturday serial» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 100), *Camino al sueño*. The *telenovela* protagonists, Antonio Montenegro and his wife Lucinda, belong to the «prominent» Soto-Mayor and Montenegro dynasties and «[...] have a perfect home, all chrome and glass and staircases» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 101). Antonio Montenegro learns from the «oldest retainer» that his wife has been previously married to an evil man, and that she must go back to him so that he will not destroy the dynasty of the Montenegros. Rechy is obviously parodying the exaggerated and over-dramatic story lines found in *telenovelas*, where romantic love is presented as the ultimate fulfilment in a woman's life. The character of Antonio says about his wife: «“She had no past except that which belongs to us both. Our lives began when we found each other”» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 102). The main characters have a «most noble heritage» and are devoted Catholics:

critics have debated whether he should be considered a Chicano writer or not. *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* signals a thematic shift in his work as racial and gender issues become central in the novel.

«[Antonio] was once honoured with a private audience with the Holy Pope» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 101). Equally, the servants are described as «adoring» and Tita, the Indian servant who confesses Lucinda's shameful past to Antonio, is portrayed as submissive and honoured to be working for such a noble family: «“I have been privileged to serve the Montenegros from before your birth, [...] I would have given my life for them, and then for you – and now for our Lucinda”» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 102). Such a representation of the Indian servant is indicative of the class and racial dynamics embedded in the genre.

Amalia compares the lifestyle and the events appearing in the *telenovela* with those in her own life, as if the serial was the pattern to follow:

Antonio and his wife, Lucinda, of the prominent Soto-Mayor dynasty, have a perfect home, all chrome and glass and staircases.

Amalia touched the armrests of the sofa bed. The covers she had sewn slipped off every night. She felt the matted cotton underneath. (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 101)

«Lucinda and I were married at the altar,» Antonio reminds her. «God heard our vows. My beloved Lucinda wore the purest white.»

And I did not, Amalia thought. (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 103)

When comparing her material possessions and the events of her life to those of the unrealistic televised characters, Amalia is left with a feeling of not being ethically or financially good enough. This passage exemplifies Riegel's (1996: 205) statement: «Through soap operas, viewers see other families on television to which to compare their own».

Amalia is not the only Latina woman fascinated with *telenovelas*. In the sweatshop where she works women regularly engage in a discussion of their favourite *telenovelas*. During their lunch break the female workers participate in a conversation in which they exchange views on the latest developments in their favourite *telenovelas* as if they were real events:

«Well, the wife [...] has just confronted Concha, his mistress, [...]». «Blanca told Concha she knows she's having an affair with Aurelio, although it's clearly not Aurelio's fault, he's a good man seduced. Yes, says the brazen Concha, and right under your nose. You mean while I was pregnant with my little Anuncio? Blanca demands, although she's so overwhelmed by the terrible affront that she has to sit down with her rosary in order to keep from fainting. Precisely, that vile Concha says.»

«She's an evil woman, that Concha,» another woman offered. (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 49-50)

Despite portraying *telenovelas* in a negative light, the novel reveals that they also enable women to socialize and engage in discussions initiated by the themes touched upon in the serial. This passage epitomizes Tufte's (2000: 228) argument that «[*telenovelas*] are of course a source of entertainment, but the recognition and relevance that the audience accords to the narratives reveal the meaningful social, cultural and even political functions that can be attributed to *telenovelas*». It also becomes apparent throughout the work that these Latina women watch a Spanish-speaking programme, thus allowing them to assert the linguistic aspect of their identity.

The idea that *telenovelas* function as an escape mechanism that permits Latinas to avoid facing reality is again manifested in a passage where the Immigration and Naturalization Service arrives in the sweatshop looking for illegal immigrants. The officers ill-treat the workers, especially one of the male workers, Jorge, whom they attack. Even though, during the break, the women return to their *telenovela* discussions, ignoring the recent disturbing events, one of the female workers, Rosario, offended by their indifference, shouts at them: «“Estúpidas! Don't you care about what happened to Jorge just now? Don't you care about the women who work next to you? – arrested and sent back without even their wages! For God's sake, don't you see your own sons shoved around by cops only because they're Mexicans?”» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 54).

Despite this outburst, the women remain silent for some minutes until Milagros, another worker, replies: «“What are you babbling about, mujer? Do you know?”» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 54), only to return to her chat about the serial. Later on in the novel, we learn of the problems that Milagros faces outside the fantasy world of the *telenovela*. Milagros confesses to Amalia that she is an illegal immigrant and that her sons have drug and alcohol abuse related problems. Amalia is astounded when she realises that «this was the same woman who at the sewing sweatshops kept everyone entertained with her gossip» (*The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*: 19).

Rechy articulates the *telenovela* as a genre that supports the dominant ideology and pressurizes women into accepting a passive role. It is not merely entertaining but also an escape mechanism from the harsh realities of Latina women. Thus, *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* shows the *telenovela* as a highly popular televised programme among the Latina population, although it also raises questions about the reasons for such popularity. *Telenovelas* have Latino characters and do not project a negative image of the Latino population, effectively counteracting the negative stereotypes of Latinos in US television, and allowing the Latino viewer to identify with the characters.

According to the National Council of La Raza (1997: 21), «Hispanics are virtually absent as characters in the entertainment media and as correspondents and anchors in news media». Furthermore,

[...] Hispanics in television entertainment are both more likely to be portrayed negatively and less likely to be portrayed positively than any other group. In addition, TV portrayals tend to reinforce derogatory stereotypes of Latinos as people who are poor, of low status, lazy, deceptive, and criminals. (National Council of La Raza, 1997: 29)

Similarly, Amundson and Lichter (1997: 71) argue that Latinos are underrepresented and negatively portrayed, although their analysis includes some positive developments. After studying the 1994-95 television season, they «[...] found some welcome progress in television's portrayal of Hispanics [...]». Also, «The proportion of Hispanics characters was up but still far below the proportion of Hispanics Americans in the real world. Latinos were “ghettoized” in a handful of series [...], and few portrayed prosperous, well-educated, authoritative characters». The data provided by these media studies sheds new light on the popularity of the *telenovela* and other Spanish-speaking television programmes in the US, allowing a greater understanding of their transnational success.

5. Escandón's *Esperanza's Box of Saints*

Like Cisneros and Rechy, the Mexican writer María Amparo Escandón presents a multidimensional view of the *telenovela*. Even though she may not refer to herself as a «Chicana», her transcultural experience and her residence in the US equate her to writers such as Sandra Cisneros. Escandón's first novel, *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (1999), narrates the journey undertaken by a mother who searches for her daughter. After having being told that her daughter Blanca died from an infection, Esperanza witnesses the apparition of San Judas Tadeo, the patron of lost causes, who informs her that Blanca is not dead. Convinced that Blanca has been kidnapped and sold into prostitution, she embarks on a journey from Mexico to the United States which takes her to different brothels where she ends up working as a prostitute or a peep show girl.

In this novel, the entertaining aspect of *telenovelas* is emphasized, as Mexican characters regularly watch them and are even hooked on their melodramatic plots. This is the case of Father Salvador, the priest from Esperanza's hometown, with whom she has been sharing confidences over the telephone. In one such

telephone conversation, Esperanza tells him of a customer who has bought her «exclusivity»:

«He wants me just for himself. I am lucky. I don't have to worry about other clients.»

«I see. He bought your exclusivity.»

«That's one way to put it. I don't know if that's common in this business.»

«It happened in *The Truth About Giovanna*.»

«Well, I never watched that soap opera, Father, so I wouldn't know». (*Esperanza's Box of Saints*: 122)

Father Salvador shows that his knowledge regarding prostitution matters is derived from watching *telenovelas*, exposing the extent to which the serials play a significant role in his life. His interest in this genre is revealed in another passage, where Father Salvador hurriedly ends a conversation with God because the *telenovela* is about to begin: «So please, dear God, help me. And now, I have to go. It's almost eight o'clock and I don't want to miss my soap opera. Tonight, Elizabeth Constanza finds out she has a blind twin sister. Amen.» (*Esperanza's Box of Saints*: 23). With great irony, Escandón pokes fun not only at the priest's addiction to *telenovelas*, but also at the unrealistic and overdramatic plots for which this genre is renowned.

This is not the only character in the novel to demonstrate the importance of *telenovelas*, since they are also the vehicle that allows Soledad, Esperanza's friend, to reveal her emotions, despite her detached personality:

Esperanza knew Soledad cried inconsolably at certain moments during her beloved soap operas, yet when it came to her own tragedies, she would always act as if she could take anything. At her husband's funeral, she was the only one who did not cry, at least in public. Because of that, many people believed that Soledad had never really loved Alfredo, that she had married him just because he resembled the late Mexican movie idol Pedro Infante. (*Esperanza's Box of Saints*: 122)

Apart from their capacity to entertain viewers and permit escapism, the writer reveals a more significant aspect of the *telenovelas* once Esperanza crosses the border into the United States and becomes an immigrant. Whilst she is waiting for someone in Los Angeles, Esperanza looks at the television and «[...] watched the last segment of a soap opera and wondered if Soledad was back home, watching it at the same time» (*Esperanza's Box of Saints*: 122). This event shows how the transnational dimension of *telenovelas* enables Mexican immigrants to feel somehow connected to their country. López (1995: 266) shares this line of thought when discussing the popularity of a particular *telenovela*: «Hispanics in New York, Florida, California, and the south-west watched *Simplemente*

María together with Mexico City». The *telenovela*'s ability to keep Mexican immigrants linked to their homeland is also remarked upon by Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1998: 133), who states: «Mexican immigrants maintain their main connection with that marvellous, imaginary country called Mexico via soap operas». Despite being objects of ridicule for their sensational story lines, Escandón bestows *telenovelas* with the potential to keep Mexicans in both countries connected through a common contemporary cultural thread.

6. Conclusion

The four texts analysed herein provide diverse observations on the popular genre of the *telenovela*. In some cases, this art form is articulated as manipulative and in connivance with the dominant ideology, whilst in others, resistance to its oppressive message becomes evident. Even when a writer represents the *telenovela* as an art form that manipulates women, a positive aspect is also disclosed: this mass-cultural expression allows women to socialize and to assert their cultural identity. Considering that the US media presents the Latino population quite negatively, *telenovelas* counteract these images and provide characters to which viewers can relate. Additionally, *telenovelas* enable the viewer in the US to assert the linguistic aspect of his/her identity and to obtain a sense of connection with his/her country of origin. When the *telenovela* is described as a form that maintains the female spectator trapped in her oppressed situation, it is also made clear that it is only one in a host of other discursive practices that encourage women to remain passive and silent.

Cisnero's, Rechy's and Escandón's texts invite the reader to appreciate the many layers of significance hidden in a seemingly shallow entertaining art form such as the soap opera. Whilst the three writers avoid an idealistic view on the genre, their work suggests that *telenovelas* play a significant role in the creation of a Chicano / Mexican transnational identity.

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