

## BOOK REVIEW

### The Woven Word: Helena Maria Viramontes' Tapestry of Knowledge

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*Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader.*  
Edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs. Tucson: The University  
of Arizona Press, 2013. Pp 276. \$35 (paper).

The first of Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs' critical anthologies of a single author's work, *Rebozos de Palabras: An Helena María Viramontes Critical Reader*, is a far-reaching, extensive, and flourishing text that provides new insights into one of the most important Chicana artists of our time. In 2017, Gutiérrez y Muhs published the second of these volumes, *Word Images: New Perspectives on *Canicula* and Other Works by Norma Elia Cantú*, also through the University of Arizona Press, a publisher that has proven to be committed to publishing works by and about Chicana writers and artists. Gutiérrez y Muhs has clearly found her niche in publishing volumes dedicated to a single writer that collect the most recent and innovative approaches to "las meras meras" of Chicana literature and culture.

For Gutiérrez y Muhs, the iconic item worn by many Mexican and Mexican-American women, the rebozo, symbolizes the many layers, knots, and complicated fabric of interpersonal lives that Viramontes's work so often addresses. In addition, the editor notes that her work functions as an homage to this clothing item that Viramontes herself typically dons at her speaking engagements. As the editor notes in her thorough introduction,

“Helena María Viramontes’s work functions like a rebozo, a shawl forged with words” (2). Much as Sandra Cisneros’s sweeping novel, *Caramelo*, inscribes the many symbols invoked from the rebozo, Viramontes’ texts, from her short stories to novels, “create what writers . . . could only envision weaving with words” (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2). Situating Viramontes’ writing within the Chicana feminist and philosophical responses to their exclusion from the Chicano movimiento and the longstanding erasure of Chicana art from the mainstream canon, Gutiérrez y Muhs’ edited volume is all the more significant for its unique status as the only collection dedicated solely to the study of Viramontes. The rebozo is an apt symbol not only for Viramontes’ lush writing, but also for a collection, the only one of its kind, that unites and weaves new and insightful readings of her short stories and novels.

Organized into four parts—“Latin American Perspectives,” “The Body,” “Ethics and Aesthetics,” and “Interviews”—and including a concisely written foreword by Sonia Saldívar-Hull, *Rebozos de Palabras* speaks to and complicates the existing scholarship on Viramontes that, until this book’s publication, had yet to be compiled in a single volume. While Viramontes is most known for her first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, and her short story collection, *The Moths*, several chapters in this collection discuss her more recent novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them*, examining themes of gentrification, mapping, borders, and sexuality. The eleven chapters and interviews are grounded in intersectional, Chicana feminist interpretations that illuminate Viramontes’ craft as one of the most gifted storytellers of our time. Gutiérrez y Muhs’ dedication to Viramontes scholarship, which she argues is still vastly lacking, is evident in her careful organization and editing that culminate wonderfully in the final section of the book that features Viramontes’ own voice and perspective on her writing.

Chapters in part one, “Latin American Perspectives,” address transnational approaches to the study of Viramontes. Parts two and three, “The Body” and “Ethics and Aesthetics,” examine the complicated thematics of female sexuality and liberation so prevalent in her work, including Viramontes’ often understudied craft of symbolism, metaphor, and style. In this careful organization of parts, especially parts one and two, Gutiérrez y Muhs allows readers to appreciate the chapters’ exploration of Viramontes’ literary genius, her uncanny ability to broach gender and sexual politics within families and culture through aesthetic imagery. Concluding the book is part four, a pair of interviews conducted with the author, including one with the volume’s editor. In these interviews, Viramontes gives readers insight into her writing style and habits, beautifully summed up in her statement that “writing is the only way I know how to pray because writing helps me to understand reality” (Gutiérrez y Muhs 241). Objecting to the false notion that literature is a realm separate from the daily, lived realities of our lives, Viramontes insists on the necessity of art.

One of the many strengths of this fine volume by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs is the diversity of voices, a balance of established and emerging scholars who give new life to Viramontes scholarship. The only single volume to examine Viramontes, this important work will undoubtedly serve as the benchmark for future Viramontes scholarship. *Rebozos de Palabras* is groundbreaking for its expansive approach to Helena María Viramontes’ writing, combining scholarship into a rich tapestry that unites the many layers of interpreting this Chicana writer’s unparalleled gift for words.

