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# The Grotesque Body and Women's Embodied Ethnography in Denise Chávez's Fiction

Jelena Ŝesnić

Rocío Esquibel, a protagonist of Denise Chávez's regional short story cycle *The Last of the Menu Girls*, harbours to say the least, contradictory feelings for her surroundings. In a gesture exemplary of adolescent exasperation and her attempt at individuation she professes: "Everything is wrong! … I hate this house, it's so junky and messy and crammed full of crap… It's crowded and dusty and dark…" (*The Last of the Menu Girls*, 140). If we continue to trace the roots of this fierce disavowal of her native dwelling, her birthplace, we may well wonder at the girl's sense that the home space is potentially claustrophobic and essentially unknowable. This is, however, not the only sentiment Rocío voices with respect to familiar places and spaces; when further down she addresses the local landscape of her region, the New Mexico Southwest, she paradoxically exalts the familiar and soothing images of the semi-wild nature marked by "the arid tension of the desert's balance," "energetic cries of locust and coyote," disturbed by "stormy wonder and wind" (*The Last…*, 152). It would seem that the narrative logic proposed by the girl-narrator, whose voice echoes through the cycle, suggests a very specific spatial semantics proceeding from her location, but that she also deliberately creates and sustains tensions arising from the material conditions of occupying and living in circumscribed places. The received wisdom would, in this case, mandate that the homely space be evoked in canny ways, while the outside would presumably be marked as the source of the uncanny. This, as we have seen, is often not the case with Rocío, or for that matter with other women in Chávez's texts.

In Denise Chávez's fiction, as I intend to show here not only *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986) but also in her subsequent novel *Face of an Angel* (1994), this disturbance of standard conceptualizations of different spaces amounts to a contestatory politics, which claims as its principal figure the female body in its material living conditions and practices. Certainly, Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988) and Angie Chabram's "oppositional ethnography" (Chabram 1990) can be fruitfully applied to account for this destabilizing logic of Chávez's texts, as I have shown elsewhere (Šesnić 2005). Chávez's text are contestatory primarily with respect to gender normativity as inscribed and performed in a series of bodily dispositions and practices that Pierre Bourdieu terms "habitus" (1990: 52-65) in Chávez's native Southwest, especially New Mexico. Employing the above terms, I draw on a new matrix moulded by revisionary anthropology and changing ethnographic practices, as suggested ably by numerous critics working in these disciplines or in ethnic studies (cf. Behar and Gordon 1995).

The protagonist of *Face of an Angel*, Soveida Dosamantes, for instance, shifts from the position of a bewildered observer (somewhat in line with the initially passive stance of the local informant) to the more active stance of the "indigenous ethnographer" (Clifford 1986: 9) in her pursuit of self-affirmation and self-knowledge. In the process, she becomes a communal ethnographer marking down not only the course of her life, but encompassing and documenting a much wider spectrum of local and regional sphere. Her hybrid chronicle, embedded within the novel's structure, reads alternatively as diary, work diary, oral history, letters, orally transmitted stories, and written ethnography. This is one strain energizing Chávez's narrative discourse.

The other strain, which I would like to follow up, centres on the bodily apparatus as a source of knowledge and a locus of ethnographic self-enquiry. Haraway can be our guide into material groundings of cognition, as she alerts us to the dangers of decoupling the two. Rosi Braidotti spells out the pernicious obliviousness of Western philosophy to the questions of embodied and embedded knowledge; instead, the knowledge is always dematerialized, divorced from the body, made antithetical to it (1994). If, on the other hand, we wish to emphasize the bodily and embodiment as offering a basis for a new scientific-humanistic paradigm, as has been the case with Haraway's model, we should pay greater attention to the representation of the body, specifically the female body, in Denise Chávez's hybrid texts.

The mark of gender, I will argue, has already been inscribed through the grotesqueness of the bodily materiality (and its materialization), where the insistence on corporeality is predominantly gendered. As Judith Butler insists, the body cannot precede the act of its own insubstantiation (becoming, coming into being) as "the body"—the instant its appearance is visible it has already been inscribed and marked. So further grotesque inscriptions merely "cite," to use Butler's term, reiterate and replay the initial marking of it as "the body," and consequently as the "female body" (1993: 2-3).

In fact, we can read this insistence on the materiality of knowledge as an invitation to think of the ways Chávez's work so far—and perhaps even a broader Chicana corpus—functions as a grotesque challenge to larger canonical formations, both minority and national. The emphasis on the grotesque here evokes the embodied entity as providing epistemological, historical and socio-political figure of disruption and the setting up of new forms of knowledge production and reading of texts. This epistemological investment in the grotesque is evoked forcefully at the very beginning of Gloria Anzaldúa's text, itself providing the grounding for new paradigms. Since "a borderland" is "an unnatural" construction, "in a constant state of transition," its occupants are appropriately "[*l*]*os atravesados*," namely, "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (Anzaldúa 25). The strength of Anzaldúa's model comes initially from a very definite sense of place, which brands the bodies in its purview with "ciphers" (Yaeger 1996) of the grotesque, the uncanny, abnormal and

unfixable. The evasion of fixed placement signifies the disturbance, which is registered not simply in an undisciplined, uncanny reaction (the upsetting of binaries, homely and alien, inside and outside, as Rocío's inverted logic shows), but is inscribed on the body as a grotesque legacy. Further, this knowledge etched on the bodies, both place-bound and in a state of transition, occasions a disturbance in dominant representational codes, which are either supposedly gender-neutral or body-less; in other words, bodies cause trouble (gender and otherwise, if we heed Judith Butler [1990]), and they are rather offensive and grotesque in their freakish materiality, also vaguely disturbing because they are assaulting culture's unquestioned taboos and practices.

To give an example, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) establishes a curious link between the locus of narrative (by extension also social and anthropological) authority and a deficient female body. This unexpected conjunction, uninvited first on account of its unseemly embodiedness, secondly, on account of its femininity, still becomes evident and even imperative in the figure of Eva, the ancestor, the grandmother and one of the few survivors in the novel's evocative rendition of a black community's dissolution. Initially, however, it seems that Eva's centrality has been a compensation, a prosthesis, a fill-in for her bodily lack—her severed leg. Speaking in general, Eva's body signifies the grotesque—a departure from standard classical, later on enlightenment and neo-classical parameters of beauty, and with it also the standards of truth (knowledge). Morrison ironically decides that the position central to the black community (ancestor) and a key-figure for the survival of the black family (mother, grandmother) will be occupied by a woman that has been (as psychoanalysis is wont to tell us) marked by the original lack (castration, the lack of penis), and then further branded (castrated for the second time).

Of course, one could argue that, on one level, the grotesque female body appropriately fits into the role of the fetish, and so takes on a burden to secure the subject positions of others, generously offering its own deficiency as a disguise, a surrogate and compensation. Still, something else is at work here than just a compensatory fetishistic game.

Approaching contemporary US ethnic production, one thinks about various ways in which Chicana writers take up and powerfully reorder the initial premise of compatibility between the grotesque body (which defies, eludes and exceeds the limits set down by various knowledge machines, according to Braidotti) and de-centred forms of knowledge. The grotesque body—be it in the form of the maimed matriarch (Eva); the anorexic or overweight body (Rocío and middle-aged women in Chávez, respectively); the swollen or gravid body (Soveida); the sick and scarred body; the menopausal body— may be seen in Chicana writing, here especially with reference to Denise Chávez, as analogy for the whole set of discursive transformations signalling what a number of critics nowadays recognize as "oppositional ethnography" (Chabram), revisionary anthropology, resistant discourse, and a new cultural geography (Yaeger 1996).

As we know, the insistence on matter, constant attention to the materiality of the body stands as one of determining facets of the economy of the grotesque. Further, heeding the lessons by Bakhtin, we understand that this mode subverts and disrupts, even though it does not demolish, the standardized, dominant and normative forms of knowledge.

I propose to carry out this investigation by bringing together for the moment in a sustaining and enriching dialogue feminist/cultural studies agenda, on one hand, and some salient Bakhtinian concepts, especially those worked out in Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on carnival, carnivalesque, grotesque realism, and the folk Renaissance culture, on the other. In other words, I would like to propose that Bakthin's model, aside from concepts such as heteroglossia and hybridity by now regularly applied to "minority discourse," be recognized as a viable reading strategy for approaching important aspects not only of Chávez's work, but possibly also works by other similarly positioned authors.

Let me briefly situate Bakhtinian position on the role of the body in some salient cultural practices extending through centuries and rooted in what could be defined as the transnational concept of the folk. In his discussion of Rabelais's unorthodox novel Bakhtin asserts a "cosmic and … all people's character" of the body and its aspects (Rivkin and Ryan 47). The body, and it is important to grasp this contention, "is not individualized" (47). This de-individualized, collective body, amorphous, huge, and shifting, bears at least some similarity to Chávez's representations of a cumulative body of women across generations: "Always there is an echo of the young girl in the oldest of women, in small wrists encased in bulky flesh, in the brightness of eyes surrounded by wrinkles" (*The Last…*, 65); "We *become* our mothers, our grandmothers"; "I wanted to say that I hurt the way they [the women in Soveida's family] had all hurt" (*Face of an Angel*, 449, 455). The bodily archive, layered experience, contributes to the uncanny wisdom of this monstrous but also wonderfully versatile hybrid, a collective body. Whereas for Bakhtin the stress is on the democratic, anti-hierarchical and parodic vein of this complex, in Chávez I would like to stress a more circumscribed, but nonetheless crucial, aspect of the body, the differential inscription of gender.

Let me sketch out possible points of contact between what initially may seem to be a surprising context for reading Chávez, namely, widely conceived Bakhtinian theory of the carnevalesque and folk culture, which derives in part from Bakhtin's abiding interest in the continuities of Western genre system. In this particular case, his attention is focused on the culture of folk humour, which he conceptualizes as potentially one of the archives and sources of the novel. Specifically, some of the ways in which this irreverent humour invades the novel's space may be found in the use of "degrading," exaggerated" or "scatological images," to use Bakhtin's terms (47, 46, 51). It is very indicative that in Chávez's novels (I use this term with invisible quotes here as I wish to point out instead utter generic undecidability of Chávez's texts, translatable as generic hybridity), these images abound as frames for representing women's bodies. When Bakhtin states a prevalent interest on the part of Rabelasian strain of cultural images which exploits primarily "the lower stratum

of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs" (47), this seems to be very applicable also to Chávez's representations of her protagonists' predicament, which is simultaneously their share in and contribution to grotesque realism.

If we think of "the belly," let me point out that Rocío at the beginning of the story cycle works as an intern at a hospital where she is in charge of taking the patients' food preferences for meals. This is only the first instance in Chávez where the bodily process, here pointedly joined together in the images of the sick, dying, deformed, and hungry patients, figures as a metonym for a specific type of knowledge attainment required of her female protagonists. Initially, Rocío is only vaguely aware of the potential connection between the decaying body and the sustaining process of eating (apparently only to prolong the process of decline), but later on it slowly begins to crystallize for her that the body, the erotic (here dark, mysterious and life-giving force), food, on one hand, and, on the other, its opposite—the recoil from food, disgust with it or refusal to take it, signal an on-going struggle for the definition of and control over the self. This process, far from being transcendental, that is, detached from its material conditions of emergence, is embodied and here rendered viscerally visible through constant conspicuous attention given to female bodies of different ages, in various conditions, notably those signalling its gendered nature: pregnancy, birth, deformations arising from specifically women's ailments, and the like. Thus, Chávez's scatology is satirical in the way Bakhtin reads the incursion of folk elements as a decisive element of satire and a purveyor of irony in the novel, since one of its primary functions, as I see it, is to aestheticize the unthinkable—the site of the (ailing, aging, grotesque) body.

The lower domain of the belly also figures prominently in *Face of an Angel*, where a large part of the action actually takes place in a Mexican restaurant in a small town of Agua Oscura, where Soveida works as a waitress and fills in the pages of her work diary, which serves as one of her notebooks and is conducive to her self-growth. The cooking of food, the procedure necessary to serving or consuming a meal, the cleanliness required of a waitress, but also the filthy aftermath of food consumption, all these moments constitute a shifting, ephemeral though immanent plane of women's existence. Numerous conversations among women in the household revolve around food, preparation of family meals, and kitchen routine. Chata, an able domestic and a formidable cook versed in local Mexican-Indio diet, becomes a mythic presence; a chthonic force straddling the Bakhtinian strata of the high and the low (*Face…*, 400-1). Also, a spatial regime which circumscribes domestic spaces catering to bodily functions, such as kitchen, pantry and sanitation rooms is overturned through the women's perspective. In *The Last of the Menu Girls* interior spaces—the closet, the bedroom, the sickroom—inhabited by women and filled by their trivia also acquire a life of their own.

Mary Douglas (1966) consistently upsets the neat dividing line set up between the clean and the contagious and loathsome by showing how different contexts in which bodies are placed invite more complex readings of specific elements. The body, with its protean boundaries, as well as food and different dietary practices, become the staple of her analytical effort. In her incisive reading, the ineluctable

grotesqueness of corporeal excesses is rendered tame by the imposition of a larger symbolic frame. Bodily excretions and fluids, its orifices, also corporeal rituals can function depending on circumstances either as agents of purity or markers of contamination or danger. Douglas is admittedly less concerned about cultural grid in which assignations are bestowed, such that all too easily construe the (female) body as a tabooed object, therefore all the more subjected to the process of semiosis.

On one level, it is very important to understand Chávez's scatology and interest in the grotesque in purely generic terms, to situate her narrative direction in a wider context of the return to the body as one of the central vehicles of new literary production by Chicana authors. Perhaps this return to the body not only as a capable object but also in a sense a viable source or machine of cognition becomes enabled in Chávez precisely owing to the same logic that Bakhtin finds at work in the fertile interaction between several tiers of culture especially with reference to a carnevalesque/grotesque mode. This irreverent cross-over comes across playfully in *Face of an Angel* in the image of "the Holy Tortilla," enshrined and venerated as "a sacred sign of God's appearance on this earth, the mark of God's grace" (*Face…*, 428-9). Further, this desecrating, incongruous welding of the divine and the dietary infuses the whole novel, suggesting "the gusto of those human teeth marks attempting to grab hold of the divine" (*Face…*, 429).

However, and this is where the knowledge proffered by the body begins to attain a more specific hue, Chávez's agenda is not simply a reinstitution of the bodily knowledge, as a chastening turning back to an overlooked but enabling representational practice. Her project is much deeper, and in this other aspect, somewhat antithetical to the satirical/ironic, but always creative, impulse which it was given by Bakhtin. What further upsets and energizes this programme of the recovery of the bodily is the category of gender, which crops up metonymically and allegorically in Bakhtin's formulations (for instance, in his stress on "the reproductive organs," which of course are not exclusively female, but become so in the course of his discussion of the myths of cyclical birth, fertility, the mythic significance of the womb, etc.). Whereas in Bakhtin's model the feminine, or more specifically, the female body tends to be subsumed under more general anthropological categories, in Chávez's text it is the initial premise, constituting and organizing all the subsequent insights. This means that whatever knowledge or meaning is derived from this focus on the body and its existence as a social entity is filtered through the reality of its gender status. Meaning, further, that if we grant a degree of truthfulness and authority to the embodied experience, this may yield at best what James Clifford terms "partial truths" (1986). Thus, even the crossing-over, which is so extolled by Anzaldúa, among others, has its limitations and is not an unbounded process even when carried out by the grotesque body.

Bodies gendered differently will consequently yield separate descriptions of the "same" physical environment; cultural theory, and the politics of gender in the Southwest of Chávez's novels corroborate this insight. Apart form the fact that family name, continuation and the occupancy of space—all factors guaranteeing social existence—are patrilineal, there are additional markers of borderlands as a

space which places gendered bodies in fixed hierarchies (as we observe in the prologue to the family saga told in *Face of an Angel*). In this, I would suggest, Chávez's concept of the borderlands is less liberating and more constraining than Anzaldúa's, which operates on the premise of continuous flux and transition. Soveida, en route to her emancipation, attempts to draw a history of her place and region by relying on an oral history told by Chata, a loyal, hard-working domestic help of Soveida's family. However, this version is promptly discounted by her professor in a Chicano culture class as lacking "the grand sweep" and being enmeshed in undue "emotionalism." Further, the professor doubts that Chata's "life spent in small gestures," by extension also Soveida's, spent in serving and caring for others, can provide an adequate source of "historical perspective of Indio/Hispanic culture" and "territorial information" (*Face…*, 311). In Bourdieu's terms, there is a specific "logic of practice" at work requiring that the "historical" and "territorial" archives of the United States Southwest be divorced from activities, dispositions, postures, behaviours, and material artefacts with a feminine bent. What can constitute a proper array of representations is shown by Larry Larragoite's (the owner of a local restaurant) interest in fossils, "Southwestern minerals, dinosaur eggs, geodes, and stuffed animals," in addition to Billy the Kid's mummified head (*Face…*, 186) of all things (for larger implications of this episode, cf. Šesnić 2005).

Rocío notes on her job how "food and illness intermingled" (*The Last…*, 29); the processes of eating, digesting and excreting, the matter which circulates—these facts become a hallmark of her Bildung. Also, Rocío undertaking an internship as a menu-girl serves as a rite of passage in several ways. Not only does she "confront[…] at every turn, the flesh, its lingering cries" (36), which marks the end of innocence, but the job she performs inscribes also her gender prerogatives. As a nurse substitute and a member of the hospital staff she finds herself in the position of caring, providing service, extending empathy and emotional support, all of which is seen as integral and inherent to the successful performance of a woman's role. Rocío's socialization, thus, proceeds through the ethics of caring for the body, and this ethics, principally inflected by gender, hinges on the knowledge of things physical. Even as Chávez demonstrates that these knowledge procedures—performed as complex scenarios composed of emotional responses and bodily gestures—qualify as viable forms of social practices, the restricted domain in which these may be applied and the relatively marginal status of their practitioners (Rocío among them) show how their local reach (not to say their devaluation) has everything to do with their gender status. The way Chávez argues against and contends with this devaluation, which is a pervasive cultural fact, invites a strategic use of a number of solutions mediated through the representations of the gendered, grotesque, ethnicized body.

**The female body as a tabooed object**

Lidia Curti (1998) and Patricia Yaeger (2000) have recently drawn attention to the prevalence of grotesque embodiments in women's fiction; Curti with reference to the predominantly white Anglo-American canon and Yaeger working with black and white southern women's texts. Curti reads this proliferation, sprouting, growth,

swelling, parturition, "the accumulation and overflow of bodies and languages" as distinctive feature of postmodernist feminism (Curti 107, 108). Yeager's approach to the grotesque is threefold: allegorical; anti-allegorical, a-symbolic; and testimonial, which posits the body as a site of witnessing. Yaeger encourages us to look at bodies, their shape and disposition in space as pregnant ciphers, and to attend to a semiology of the "hideous" body.

Various forms of embodiment, as well as prominent physicality, have been construed as women's prerogatives. Western epistemology still operates on presupposed, even if submerged, assumption that women are closer to the bodily forms of perception and sentience (cf. Braidotti, Curti). Rocío is to gain self-knowledge through reiterating, but also "citing" (always with a twist and residual meaning, cf. Bulter 1993: 12-13), the emergent Chicana femininity. That femininity is figured as an archive of bodily practices, uses and behaviours.

Chávez, it seems, wants to intervene in the automatism of the process of transmission of femininity. Her female characters articulate the fateful and inescapable pull of the body and its exigencies. Moreover, Rocío and Soveida find themselves in a position where they must engage precisely this overarching grid which invisibly cloaks their bodies; the make-up, the hair, clothes which is too much India or too little Anglo; the fetishization of virginity, submissiveness, disposition for suffering (physical and mental), all these practices are inscribed on the collective, cultural womanly body in the form of tradition, customs, and common sense behaviour. The woman as an oppositional or revisionary anthropologist has to defamiliarize the assumed link between the bodily disposition and the social plane. For Soveida this implies moving away from trumped-up images of the Virgin, angel and the May Day Queen for school girls and in the direction of dangerous (because mysterious and androgynous) physicality of Catholic saints, as well as the grotesque, undead, wailing woman, La Llorona (*Face…*, 47).

**Ideology as Body and Blood**

Chávez repeatedly defamiliarizes the presumably suture-less process of attaining womanhood by representing scarred, disfigured and hysteria-wrecked female bodies. The underbelly of Rocío's Bildung contains the unacknowledged pain, sickness (both mental and physical) and induced self-hate. In the willow episode, Rocío, still "ungendered," is complying with the mystique of the landscape, its familiar shapes, sounds and colours; in order to arrive full circle to its more sinister implications in the concluding episode of the Bildungs-cycle, "The Compadre", where she begins to understand the underlying politics of spacialization cutting through the local space and marking it with violence and more subtle forms of coercion.

In "Space Is a Solid," Rocío feels unease and nausea looking at her landlady's maimed body castrated and de-sexualized by mastectomy. However, the freakishness of this grotesque being is to be read on the background of the interrelated regimes of interpretations, as suggested by Yaeger, namely, those at a macro-social level of race and class (2000: 12-13). The disfigured form, thus, comes

to stand for a disturbed social order, which maniacally and hysterically (in the person of Mrs. Wembley) attempts to keep the contagion and filth at bay. The demarcation of the unclean is carefully regulated, if we remember Douglas, and is here embodied in animals and racialized and dirty apartment dwellers, all of whom fail to maintain the boundary set down by Mrs Wembley's obsession with cleanliness. Furthermore, the inability of any controlling agency to police these boundaries is reinforced through the fact that Mrs Wembley herself is branded by illness and decay, in her mind deserving only of "disgust and horror" (*Last…*, 125) just like the unsavoury and unclean behaviour of her tenants.

Yaeger's approach to the reading of the grotesque places premium on countering secrecy and silence accompanying the lack. This hidden, or covered up, solidifies the fetishistic logic of substitution, compensation and disavowal, while the semiotics of the grotesque would seem to take the opposite route: its blatant visibility, the obviousness of its lacking or surfeit seem to flaunt both its departure from the norm, and to undermine the secretive operation of the fetishistic compensation. The uncovering of the body—literal and figural—signifies a direct assault on convenient cover-up executed through idealized and fetishized images of intact, compact, and beautiful female bodies in culture at large, here specifically New Mexico regional culture. Soveida falls prey to this fetishization by her fist husband Ivan, while Rocío is vaguely aware of the way this recoil from the more grotesque, unmanageable aspects of her body instrumentalize her—turn her into an object remade in another's image and immobilize her. She becomes yet another figure in an endless procession of female performers for the benefit of others. Her "feminization," proceeding as it is through recipes taunted by her sister and older friends, in fact constrains her through its excessive femininity. There is clearly a problem in the way this specific cultural geography determines a female subject's emergence.

Mirror images offered to Rocío are virtual, substitute images, obviously. Yet this provides guidance to Rocío as she is struggling to summon another—presumably more authentic—vision. This image can emerge only if the fetishized body is displaced by or juxtaposed to the grotesque body. The grotesque disturbs the norm; furthermore, it mocks the norm and belies its taken-for-granted status. The grotesque body challenges the boundaries of the ordinary, normal, disciplined body; it speaks of and testifies to other ways of being a subject that detours from prearranged scripts. Rocío is repulsed and disturbed by the scenes in the hospital, but is by the same token shocked into knowledge and awareness: "My new life was about to begin. I had made that awesome leap into myself that steamy summer of illness and dread…" (*The Last…*, 35-36). That is not the only effect of the grotesque economy. In "Space Is the Solid" Rocío experiences the near fatal sliding into disintegration, which is indicated through a set of grotesque images: her hands seem to turn blue; her apartment teems with spiders; enclosed places such as stores and wardrobes make her claustrophobic; she recoils from food or is too sick to take it; her body visibly deteriorates; she mingles with animals, etc. These disfigured perceptions, however, don't simply stand for, what Yaeger terms, incursions of the

real, they also contain an emergent archive of embodied knowledge, clashing with the standard regime. These omens relayed through grotesque images mark a tenuous boundary line between the crushing discipline, which induces Rocío's breakdown, and an emergent alternative script, which may enable her to counteract it.

Perhaps Chávez's argument here suggest that girls and women in the Southwest are so inundated by the continuous rehearsal of standard images of femininity that it takes an epistemological rupture to puncture their complacency. This rupture, then, is provided by the incursion of the grotesque. To paraphrase Butler, the bodies, and I extend that to the grotesque, fail to comply with the standard. It is again instructive to look at Rocío and the example given of her socialization into her future female role. The role models in "Shooting Stars" (itself suggestive of the loss of illusion) work, as I see it, as an ironic counterpart to the gritty reality of dying, deformed and suffering bodies in "The Last of the Menu Girls" and "Space Is a Solid."

The grotesque female body here seems to be one way for Rocío to elude the apparently unfailing, immutable trajectory of feminine becoming in the macho Southwest, passed down from one generation of women to the next, as shown by grown-up Rocío in "The Compadre," where what is communicated almost imperceptibly through the familiar, homely and casual cadences of Spanish and English is the inexorable logic of gender roles and an ethnography of the quotidian, fixing the subject's position and range of actions.

**The familiarity of the grotesque**

It seems that the status of the grotesque (as disfigurement, lack or superabundance, overgrowth) renders the female body especially vulnerable, but also enables it to occupy a position conducive to specific, "local" knowledge production. Still, even as some scholars hail this as a liberating development, cautionary voices suggest how even the seemingly enabling positionality presupposes a careful demarcation of bodies and attendant desires in specific places. Yaeger, for one, claims how even familiar and sustaining places can be filled with diseased practices, marred by violence, infused with fear for their female inhabitants. In Yaeger's words, this creates a supplemental "ghost story," which almost demands the themes of haunting, secrecy, and the unnatural (1996: 6).

The feminine grotesque further seems to suggest that the familiar and the uncanny stand cheek by jowl. Even the most intimate and secure places (a child's room, home, closet) can unexpectedly turn into a frightful space. Yaeger refers to one of the functions of the grotesque as a figure of denouncing secrecy and silence—as a way of representing what the dominant every-day practice keeps suppressed, and yet is instrumental for its perpetuation and functioning.

In "Space Is a Solid," this equation evokes the solidity of space as a buffer against Rocío's breakdown, but it also references a threatening aspect of spatial "coagulation," which can suck in a character and so contribute to the utter loss of self. Rocío experiences disintegration, which she needs to counter by writing a

diary, by teaching and acting—conducting activities which contribute to the imaginative reconstruction of the fragmented self. Still, it is within the space of home (or what she calls one), that the uncanny threatens to overwhelm her. Likewise, for Soveida this legacy of "something powerful, dark, and frightening" (*Face…*, 71), leads through deciphering the underside of seemingly regular, ordinary family and domestic proceedings, what she calls "the official family record" (51).

Chávez shows how for women the binaries inside/outside, even while the inside has been constructed as women's privileged sphere, don't work unambiguously. Thus it is the outside that offers a salvaging alternative to her heroines. However, this swinging between the two positions (on the inside/on the outside) often forces a woman into assuming a strategy of grotesque intervention. Having violated the distribution of bodies in space, and simultaneously having disturbed the gender economy which sustains the spatial distribution of bodies and desires (Yaeger 1996), a woman finds herself designated a "freak," a "throwaway" body, a "gargantuan" object (for all these terms cf. Yaeger 2000) out of proportion in its apportioned space, or a tiny, diminutive thing swallowed up by it, such as when Rocío feels bouts of claustrophobia or feels devoured by space, or when Soveida experiences the spaces she shares with both her husbands as weird, inhospitable and frightful, suffused with danger, death, and violence. The grotesque here is no longer, or not just, a viable strategy of disruption of and opposition to the imperious order of social practices which in their turn regulate bodies, but serves as a pointed reminder of the fragility of the body's solidity. This solidity, apparently, can be abused and manipulated, thus turning the body into a grotesque and vulnerable vehicle of witnessing, whereas the tenor inflicting the abuse remains totally outside its purview, only faintly glimpsed through the grotesque effects it has wrought.

The grotesque is, then, seized by Chávez as a possibility of a pre-eminent feminist writing practice. Insofar as it is grounded in representations of excessive and transgressive physicality, and satirically extols suppressed and unclean bodily functions, the disruptive potential of this representational scheme has been appropriately articulated by Bakhtin. Chávez continues in this vein, but is also bent on showing that the grotesque is as much a symptom of a larger cultural malaise as its potential solution, and that it has to be examined alongside salient socio-cultural categories, notably space, gender and intransigent cultural assumptions.

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