

WHO DO YOU LOVE? *Stories and Social Justice*

Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson

Their Dogs Came with Them: A Novel. By Helena Maria Viramontes. New York: Simon & Schuster/Atria, 2007. 328 pages. \$23.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-7432-8766-1.

The woman who was not old had stumbled onto the church while searching for a safe and warm place to sleep for the night....If one would pass the woman while driving home from the office after a crinkled day at work, one might acknowledge her disorientation...One would need much more than obvious assumptions in order for the driver to turn off the ignition key, set the parking brake right and ask after her. One would have to be close enough to look into her eyes, jump into the trunk of her heart, lift the stage curtains to see behind her props. It was one thing to assume, another to conjure, and yet another to feel for her. One would need metaphor to love her. (124–25)

—*Their Dogs Came with Them: A Novel*

Helena Maria Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came with Them* is a novel sure to become a touchstone in Chicana/o literature for the ways it crystallizes the urgency of the imagination in the struggle for social justice. In this literary tour de force, ethics and aesthetics sustain each other. Viramontes has previously noted that her writing is motivated by her love for the people she writes about; in her latest novel, love and compassion drive an unflinching story of violence, trauma, and loss, as well as the possibility of resistance and recovery. An elliptical narrative that forms a chain of interlinked lives, this gripping story follows not one, but four protagonists

who live in the same place and time, East L.A., between 1960 and 1970, and whose lives are marked by alienation from each other and themselves. The effect of the tale, which is told from multiple points of view, is simultaneously fragmentary when viewed up close and mosaic-like when seen from a distance; the pieces fit together into a vision of a community that, while broken by the violence of war at home and abroad, nonetheless, is made up of individuals determined to survive.

We see the world principally through the eyes of four Chicanas: Ermila, a teenager living with her grandparents after being abandoned by her mother; Turtle, a butch young chola, adrift and homeless without her brother; Ana, ginger haired, upwardly mobile, and the caretaker of her Anglo father and mentally ill brother, Ben; and Tranquilina, promised to God by her mother, and who, with her parents, runs a ministry for the homeless and hungry. Each woman is the center of a constellation of characters. Ermila's narrative includes that of her grandparents, her friends, and their mothers and aunts. Turtle's brings us to her brother, Luis Lil Lizard, and the McBride boys, and then to their father, Frank, and their Uncle Angel. Ana's story is inseparable from those of her brother, their absent mother, and their lonely Anglo father. Tranquilina's eponymous calm is framed by her parents' survival of their desert crossing before her birth and a more recent traumatic physical assault on the three of them. This embedding of each person's life within many others creates connections that, while sometimes invisible to the characters themselves, are legible to the reader as repeated fragments and phrases—leitmotifs of beauty and connection—in spite of their often troubling content. Even the homeless woman who, disoriented and hungry, stumbles into Tranquilina's ministry has a place in this community, a connection to the other characters in the novel, albeit one visible only to the reader.

Viramontes creates a cinematic chain that links these individual characters: events are repeated from multiple points of view, linking these fragmentary truths. Early one morning Turtle sees a homeless woman who strangely smiles at her, and a bit later, out of hunger and desperation, she considers stealing what she thinks is a bag of *pan dulce* from two women; in the following chapter, we see that same exchange of looks from the point of view of the homeless woman who smiles at Turtle—to keep herself safe—and we learn that the parcel is not bread, but meat destined for Tranquilina's soup kitchen. The world presented here is composed of many truths; in representing several of them, Viramontes creates a vivid, egalitarian, and detailed whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Everyone's point of view matters.

In the lives of each of the four protagonists, family members become strangers, forced apart by different forms of war: poverty, Vietnam, gangs, and the local Quarantine Authority, referred to as the QA. Violence, assault, and trauma mark their lives, most chillingly in the form of sexual violence—three of the four main characters have survived it. War shapes the time and place of the novel. The QA sprays bullets on streets shut down by militarized checkpoints—stray and potentially rabid dogs their supposed target; East L.A. is figured as occupied territory, a mirror of the war in Vietnam. Colonialism, alluded to in the title, is not past, but continuing and ever present. The conquest now is embodied in the building of the freeways that fracture communities and literally destroy homes, and the QA's curfew, roadblocks, and ID checks.

Viramontes traces this chain of violence to its logical conclusion in a narrative climax that intertwines the lives of these individuals with each other and with the reader. She possesses the rare narrative gift of being able to reveal the complex interiorities, personalities, and motivations of characters that are usually forgotten by readerly sympathies. The novel's power and

poignancy lie in Viramontes' ability to render the person rather than the stereotype—the homeless, the mentally ill, the gang banger, the *mojado*. Through metaphor, we feel their pain, understand their motivations, and see the world through their eyes. We come to love them, and easy judgments become impossible. Gang and military violence enfold and destroy not only the innocent, but also some of the perpetrators of the violence themselves—dehumanizing and unmaking their personhood. Resistance, then, for both the characters and for Viramontes, depends on asserting their personhood and their dignity. Readers cannot help but be changed by the experience of entering into their lives. These are characters that stay with us, long after we finish reading the novel. We want to talk about them, if not to them. This is revolutionary literature that comes from a place of love and empathy—belief in the human spirit. The power of such belief sustains not only Tranquilina at the end of the novel, but also, potentially, us.