

Rebozos, Our Cultural Blankets

Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs

Independent Scholar

Rebozos are the stencils of womanhood in the Chicana memory. Dolores del Río, Carmen Zapata, María Felix, Gloria Marín, and Flor Silvestre as well as the image of the revolutionary *soldadera* inscribed in our consciousness as the "real women" of our history, all wear rebozos. The Mexican virgin's manto as well as all the "shawls" on other iconic virgins in Catholic religion could also be interpreted as a rebozo. Rebozos are an intimate part of Chicana culture. Almost every Chicana owns a rebozo. She may never wear it, but she has one in her dresser or altar.

Rebozos appear in many contemporary literary texts of today. I examine some of these texts briefly in this analysis. Rebozos are not mere decorations, but representations of something much greater that entices the wearer or onlooker to become synchronized into its center. They are, if you will, the sacred symbolic cloth that transports us into a communal individualized sensibility Chicanas have maintained and will continue to maintain for posterity. Rebozos are memory and ritual at the same time. Rebozos represent womanhood served in a bowl of folklore and struggle, motherhood and fashion: a myriad of uses, activities and memories for Mexicana/Chicana women to digest continuously. In an article in the Los Angeles Times on rebozos "Wrap Party Marks Renaissance of Rebozo" on November 26, 1999, (almost at the end of the millenium) the Chicano "Times Fashion Writer," Michael Quintanilla predicts the return of the rebozo:

Once considered an ethnic garment—and worn by artists like Frida Kahlo as well as featured in paintings that show women wearing them—the rebozo is still versatile, fashionably speaking, that is.

The women at the museum's fund-raising dinner that made tribute to the rebozo with a fashion show called "El Rebozo y sus encantos" ("The Charms of the Rebozo") donned theirs—or borrowed one from their grandmother, mother or aunt—in a

variety of ways: tied around the waist, wrapped around the head, fashioned around the hips. Saldivar changed the look of her \$40 satin fuschia rebozo three times throughout the evening: around the arms, then off her shoulders and finally, across her neck and down her back, a la Isadora Duncan. Que stylish!

Move over pashminas, rebozos are having their turn. The rebozos, sold at the museum's gift store, in shops on Olvera Street and in specialty stores in East Los Angeles, can range from \$30 to \$160 depending on the fabric and size. The shawls are typically two feet wide but lengths vary from four to eight feet. . . .

"The rebozo is a work of art. It has a cultural and an aesthetic continuity to it. A lot of modern women in Mexico are using the rebozo again because it is one of those incredible master pieces of design." Besides that, "it's practical and somehow integrates the new with the old and the future," he said. "That is very important. When somebody wears a rebozo, it is a cultural statement, not just an exotic cloth but recognizing the contributions of a civilization." (E4)

Through the previous observations by Michael Quintanilla (journalist) and Gregorio Luke, (Executive Director of the museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach) one can clearly understand why rebozos appear vividly in Mexicana and Chicana literature, literary criticism and photography as well as cultural studies, most prominently within the last ten years of last century.

Henceforth, it is first important to look at the historical and spiritual value of rebozos by retrospectively looking at their precedence. A description of the rebozo in an anthropological book by Donald and Dorothy Cordry states that the rebozo is:

the white head-covering, a plain-wear rebozo, is woven on a treadle loom, and measures 30 by 152 inches, with hand fashioned ball fringe on the ends—some eighty-six balls to each end... On the other hand, ancient people also used tufts and fringes (Cordry and Cordry 136)

The rebozo in history is described in many manners:

The rebozo is worn over the shoulders, shawl wise, but more commonly is folded flat over the head, the 30-inch width being divided into thirds. The length is similarly divided, the whole form in a layered cloth about 10 by 19 inches which balances over the head from front to back; the rebozo falls to shoulder length behind, providing ample protection from the sun. (Cordry and Cordry 239)

Like most Mexicans, the rebozo is also unable to claim whether its origin is purely indigenous or Spanish in some way. "Items of women's dress which are of Spanish origin are the blouse, the gathered skirt, and possibly the rebozo. As Dr. Daniel F. Rubín de la Borbolla has said, the rebozo is of 'nebulous origin'" (Cordry and Cordry II)

Contradictory to the previous statement and complimentary to future conclusions by the Cordrys, Manuel Toussaint attests in 1967 that the rebozo is:

oriental in origin, has come to be the garment symbolical of the Indian woman of Mexico. She uses it in a thousand ways: as a headdress, wrapped in a crown for protection from the sun, as a proper rebozo or scarf, covering the face to leave only a part visible, as a shawl against the cold, as finery to enhance and ornament her personal charms. The weaving of the rebozo is a highly skilled technique, in spite of the primitive looms which are used. (Toussaint 388-89)

As stated previously the Cordrys give similar conclusions:

Whether the rebozo was adopted with the edict of 1582, issued by the Real Audiencia, compelling creoles not to dress in Indian garb; or whether it developed as has been stated elsewhere—from the dictates of priests that the converted Indian women cover their heads in church; or whether they may have adopted the woven huipil in some areas, is not certain.... The fact that the rebozo is almost always ikat dyed is an interesting

point. Ikat is not common in present-day Indian garments, but was used in pre-Hispanic times in Peru and almost certainly in Mexico. There is the possibility that the rebozo was introduced from Southeast Asia, where ikat was well developed, and skirts and rebozo-like garments were common. According to Foster's data, the smaller cloths used in Mexico would possibly be more Spanish than the rebozo. (Cordry and Cordry 130)

Interestingly enough the rebozo was of much smaller proportions in Spain. And I say interestingly enough because in present day California as we will later see in this discussion, lechugueras, women lettuce pickers, wear a handkerchief on their faces and heads almost like a rebozo. In a poster printed in 1996 by "Neltiliztli" a human rights group about an "Evento Zapatista" that took place in Watsonville, California, the zapatista woman on the poster wearing a snow cap that looks like a rebozo and carrying a rifle has more the appearance of a lechuguera working in the fields than that of a zapatista, or is she both to other Chicana's consciousness?(1)

The smallness of this new kind of face cover reminds us again of the Spanish attire described by the Cordrys because it is inherited by the Spaniards from the eight hundred year Islamic rule:

George M. Foster indicates that the rebozo in Spain is usually a small square cloth, sometimes no larger than a handkerchief, usually not similar to the long-fringed Mexican rebozo (Foster 98). This later item of women's dress in our opinion, maybe of Mexican origin.... (Cordry and Cordry 130)

As we can see this nebulosity in origin about the rebozo continues today, although its cultural significance and value as a cultural icon are undeniable. In Mexicano/Chicana/o culture today a rebozo represents many metaphorical meanings. It is very much a Chicana icon because it has a working class memory. "Ten, twenty years ago you wouldn't be caught dead with a rebozo on, because of its working-class image," states one of the women on the runway at the museum event. She also adds, "I told my aunts that the rebozo was back, and they thought it was so amusing" (Quintanilla E4). Yet other women

spoke about how it had a very deep meaning for them because their grandmothers carried all their kids in a rebozo while doing housework or because their mothers used them while they were growing up. The working-class issue is central to understanding why subverting this stereotype icon from paintings by Diego Rivera, or soldadera pictures in history books,⁽²⁾ (specifically Chicano history books) to pictures taken in *Elle* magazine in August of 1991 of world renown Chicana author Sandra Cisneros wearing a rebozo is so magnificently important in rebirthing the rebozo. Moreover, this reappearance of working-class historical attire in a woman's fashion magazine shifts its meaning from an iconic garment of the working-class, also often times Catholic masses (whose ancestors participated in the Mexican Revolution) to one of transnationalism. Culture, tradition, and fashion become amalgamated into one through the rebozo motif.

But the rebozo is much more than all this, an at least five hundred year old icon is a symbol of resistance and inscription of a culture into various others. It is a boundary of ones body; it is a space uncrossed by others. A rebozo has been, and to some Chicanas/Mexicanas or their immediate relatives continues to be, one or more of these: a belt, a coat, an apron, a garment, a cover, a shield, a purse, a pre-Columbian slinky, (although it is argued by Francisco Santamaría that the rebozo became such as it is known today during colonial times) an insignia, a tie from mother to grandmother, a sign of womanhood, a shelter, a hiding place, a wheel barrel, a roof, an altar, a clothesline, a bandage, a string, a song, a kerchief, a tablecloth, an adornment, a tool. In our anthropological cultural quest we find that it is the umbilical chord with which every generation has been tied even to pre-Colombian times. Most importantly it reminds us of the mother image that many of us carry in our hearts with tenderness. But, because this is the most obvious use of a rebozo as a cradle for culture, Chicana/Mexicana culture, and womanhood it sometimes reminds us of the stereotype of indigenous woman/mother/rebozo. Francisco Santamaría in his famous *Diccionario de Mexicanismos*, (1959), defines the rebozo as follows: m. chal, paño o pañolón que cubre los hombros y que usan mucho las mujeres de la clase media y pobre, sobre todo en el interior, donde es típico. Se fabrica de clases primorosas y finísimas, en seda, lana y algodón (921).

With Catholicism a rebozo becomes a sign of faith, decency, modesty, trust, an almost chastity armor. The Catholic church required that women cover their hair upon entering a church until the 1970s. Thus, the rebozo became the cover par excellence for poor women because they could not afford other head covers and because of its multipurpose profile that we have previously listed. If you wore a rebozo it was an almost immediate sign of Catholic spirituality and faith as well as all the other ingredients, such as "modesty" and "decency." These ingredients including the rebozo were synonymous with being a "good woman" in Mexico prior to 1970 and at least in the twentieth century alluded to being a lower-class person. The rebozo was the lower-class cover and tool among other things up until 1580 when it was finally available in silk and "became so popular with the women in society," (Luke in Quintanilla 1999). As we discussed above, earlier this century "you wouldn't be caught dead with a rebozo on," said Teresa Saldivar, alluding to how important the rebozo was in Chicano communities but not usually worn outside the home, and how cyclical and binary its image has been. Chicanos and Mexicanos have adopted the image of the China Poblana, as a folklore attire that comes with a rebozo, a sequin long skirt and an embroidered blouse, but in the nineteenth century the "china" image was one of prostitution, rebozo included. We can see this in costumbrista paintings by Hesiquio Iriarte and Carlos Nebel. Francisco Santamaría also implies this in his literary examples and definition of "china":

La China de México era un tipo especial que alcancé, y que ha desaparecido por completo, o a lo menos el traje y modales que la distinguían. La pintura que hace de ella Payno en su Viaje a Veracruz, aunque poetizada, es bastante exacta en cuanto a lo externo; mas no era la mujer del lépero, sucia y desharrapada, sino una mujer del pueblo que vivía sin servir a nadie y con cierta holgura a expensas de un esposo o de un amante, o bien de su propia industria. Pertenecía a la raza mestiza, y se distinguía generalmente por su aseo, por la la belleza de sus formas, que realzaba con un traje pintoresco, harto ligero y provocativo, no menos que por su andar airos y

desenfadado.(Santamaría 391)

Con su rebozo terciado
Y su falda de sarasa,
Su escotado zapatito
Y su breve andar que encanta:
Es la trigueña chinita
La mujer más resalada
Que en el suelo mexicano
Naciera de sangre hispana." (Somoano in Santamaría 391)

Although an entity of beauty and sexuality the rebozo also represented strength and independence as we note through Santamarías' words. According to him the china poblana, part of whose attire is a rebozo, could also be a beautiful woman with a picturesque outfit that supported herself or was dignifiedly supported by a husband or a lover and did not have to work for others.

In "La Bamba" a traditional Veracruzano wedding dance, now commonly practiced as Mexican folklore in the United States as well as in Mexico, el rebozo is the metaphorical knot that ties people up in a life together. It is the representation of a union between a man and a woman only if they can in this dance together tie the knot and make a bow with their feet. This is also a sign of a transculturated practice between pre-Colombian, colonial and contemporary cultures. One could even name this a "Tlatelolco," a representation of three mainstream cultures amalgamated together.(3)

Popular "ranchera"(country western Mexican) music women singers such as Flor Silvestre and Lucha Villa, wore rebozos, ever since the beginning of the visual entertaining culture evolved after the Mexican Revolution, and throughout the century in folkloric films made for, and viewed by, the masses. Two other women who remain in our historical popular memory as Mexicanas or Chicanas are María Felix and Dolores del Río.

Dolores del Río has also been revived by Amalia Mesa-Bains through her mixed-media altar installation of 1984 and reconstructed in 1990 as part of the exhibition, Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation 1965-1985. The altar for Dolores del Río, "An Ofrenda for

Dolores del Río," exhibits eleven pictures of the actress, portraying various subjectivities of Dolores represented in Mexican and U.S. cinema. In the central picture placed in the middle of the installation, we see Dolores' face and bust wearing a rebozo. She is also portrayed wearing a rebozo in one other photograph on the left-hand side of the altar installation. This important artistic endeavor by Amalia Mesa-Bains revives for Chicanas the image of a beautiful, successful woman wearing a rebozo. It posits the rebozo in a central, junctural part of our self-identity and allows for this subject-position with which we may identify to be acceptable as beauty, art and culture. Tex-Mex women singers have also worn rebozos throughout the twentieth century, and the rebozo on their bodies represented a rebellious marginality that traditional country western Mexican music has always embodied.(4) But, it is during colonial times that two of the most popular folk songs: "La Llorona" and "La Negra" were written with the rebozo as a main protagonist:

llorona llévame al río, tápame con tu rebozo, llorona, porque me muero de frío(La Llorona).

Cuándo me traís a mi negra que la quiero ver aquí con su rebozo de seda que le traje de Tepic (La Negra).

Another clear example of the rebozo leaping through history photographing class is in early Mexicana/Chicana literature. María Cristina Mena, a Mexican woman who left Mexico just before the Mexican Revolution erupted and came to the US and triumphed as a writer, uniformly represents in her short stories published between 1913 and 1916, in *The Century Magazine* during the Mexican Revolution, a story of classism. This interesting story of classism is told by the rebozo. In her literature we clearly see Mena's hierarchization of Mexican society at the turn of the century. According to her at that time there were three classes in Mexican society : the upper class "the caste de sombrero", the middle class "de tápalo" (of shawl) and the lower class "de rebozo." Throughout the story "Doña Rita's Rivals" Mena tells of Doña Rita who ruins her son's life because she does not want him to marry "una de tápalo." According to Santamaría, the

tápalo is a "Chal, mantón, rebozo con que se tapan la cabeza y el rostro las mujeres. Pañolón que usan sobre todo las mujeres pobres" (2). Contrary to what Mena says, Santamaría gives several examples of the word "tápalo" as utilized in literature and most of them speak of the tápalo as lower class, and only one quote speaks favorably of the tápalo as a silk accouterment: "Me puse mi tápalo de seda y mi vestido café;/saqué un espejo y me ví:/ ¡Qué chula viuda quedé!" (Santamaría 1006) This last piece is a narrative poem written by an author called "Mendoza" and part of the book *El Romance*. The protagonist of the poem sees herself as beautifully dressed in a tápalo, and it is important to note that her tápalo is made out of silk, a very favorable material to the post-Mexican Revolution Mexican middle class. But the poem is also sarcastic and obviously speaks from the voice of a marginalized woman.

For Frida Kahlo the rebozo becomes a sign of nationalism, indigenismo, working class ethics as well as self-defense, resistance, reassurance, escape, a hair piece, a frame for her face, a decoration, a necklace, an accessory for her Indian wardrobe and a companion, almost a trademark of her work. It is a connection with her indigenous roots and her Mexicana past. It ties her to other women and other women's suffering. It places her in a society of working-class ideas, where she wants to be. It transports her to a temporality that rescues her pre-Columbian roots from extinction both in her life as well as in her art.

As we have seen, the rebozo has suffered various symbolic transformations. The new rebozo, the Chicana rebozo, is sometimes practical, sometimes luxurious, sometimes nationalistic. In the work place, in the fields, for example, the rebozo has turned into a kerchief at times, or it continues to be a shawl that envelopes a woman's neck. Less material is used every day on a woman's face. Its transformation is directly linked to practicality or anonymity of the self and, in harsh climates, for women (as are the fields) a way of becoming invisible and equal. I am not speaking here only about the roughness of the work but also seeing the rebozo as a vessel for entering into the self in order to escape harassment from authorities or men or other workers. Fieldworker men don't often wear a handkerchief on their faces. Because of the world of pesticides in which the farm workers move, the

rebozo or kerchief of the fields has a different characteristics. It has also become a filter. It filters dust and pesticides but also language and harmful elements as well as outside culture. Its possible significant contribution to feminism is that it also establishes a de-objectification of the body. Most lechugueras and freseras look alike in the fields, faces shielded with similar colors, similar cloth. San Francisco Bay Area Jewish/Mexicana artist Juana Alicia Franklin depicts the lechugueras' vulnerability as well as their strength in her various murals, specifically in her mural titled "Lechugueras".

In current Chicana literature the rebozo also makes significant appearances. As a commodity, it is as Helena María Viramontes said her "security blanket." By embracing it, she finds comfort. She comments that she wears a rebozo to all her readings and speaking engagements. "While I throw it back it gives me time to think of a response." At Stanford University she spoke enveloped in a beautiful golden sky blue rebozo from Africa in an interview on May 20, 1997. "It covers my body," she said referring to the de-objectifying elements a rebozo could have. This de-objectification is similar to what some women feel the veil accomplishes in some Islamic countries.⁽⁵⁾ It's a cultural piece of cloth that recovers her dignity and "helps" her "think."

Other writers have finally had the rebozo appear in their literature. Sandra Cisneros is the first to literally photograph such an important Mexican/Chicano feminine icon through her writings in Woman Hollering Creek and other Stories, but the rebozo is not devoid of other types of cultural appearances in literature. Sandra Cisneros is pictured by Frederick Cantor on the back cover of the book, and her picture occupies half the back cover of the hardback. In the photos, she is wearing an ikat rebozo, the poor or indigenous women's rebozo in black and white. The word rebozo appears twice in the short story "Eyes of Zapata" in which Sandra tells a story from the perspective of Emiliano Zapata's lover, Inés, and once in "Bien Pretty" as items in a list of possessions the protagonist owns: "Two rebozos de bolita y de seda." (Cisneros 141) The late twentieth-century Chicana is able to have two rebozos usually reserved for the more upper class amongst her belongings even though this "de bolita" silk rebozo had been reserved for other classes earlier on in that same century. This is ironically revealed through Cisneros' literature. In "Eyes of Zapata,"

Inés, uses her rebozo as her luggage when she abandons her father for Emiliano: "I felt so alone that night. I gathered my things in my rebozo and ran out into the darkness to wait for you by the jacaranda tree"(Cisneros 90). Inés Alfaro has the properties of a nagual, which means that she can become an owl and fly as well as predict the future. Sandra's protagonist speaks rebozo both in English and Spanish in "Eyes of Zapata": "And I see my clean huipil and my silk Sunday shaw...And I see other faces and other lives. My mother in a field of cempoazúchitl flowers with a man who is my father. Her rebozo de bolita spread beneath them. The smell of crushed grass and garlic. How, at a signal from her lover, the others descend. The clouds scurrying away"(Cisneros III). Her mothers' love, hate and torture bed is a rebozo, a place of love and pain. A place where the men from society revenge: "The star of her sex open to the sky. Clouds moving soundlessly, and the sky changing colors. Hours. Eyes still fixed on the clouds the morning they find her—braids undone, a man's sombrero tipped on her head, a cigar in her mouth, as if to say, this is what we do to women who try to act like men"(Cisneros III). Chicana writers are establishing a literature that also demands a psychic cultural space for Mexicans/Chicanos in the US.

Norma Cantú's Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera. (1995) takes us through border crossings that make us realize that we could become Azucena the protagonist of her autobioethnographic fiction at any given moment. The reading of ethnic literature is in fact charged with symbolic images that represent white walls, blank spaces to a non-bicultural reader. The image of the rebozo is in place in the memory of a bilingual, bicultural, "bi-sensible" reader that runs into Canícula. A bicultural reader knows that the China Poblana attire, (present several times in Canícula, including on the cover of the book as the picture of her mother), comes with a rebozo and that the nationalistic Mexican lottery card the "chalupa" also comes with a rebozo. Gloria Anzaldúa has succinctly expressed this: "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (Anzaldúa 59) Both the Chalupa and the China Poblana are alluded to in Canícula, or, in the case of the China Poblana, are impersonated by the mother and daughter in a nationalistic picture of "China Poblana One" and "China Poblana Two" where the child pro-

tagonist describes how she feels about wearing the China Poblana outfit. The mental picture of a woman whom we know wears a rebozo only lands on bicultural, bilingual readers: "And I feel like the Chalupa in the lotería game, like María Félix, Dolores del Río, a movie star frozen in costume." (Cantú 39) The world renown María Felix as well as Dolores del Río's main subjectivities in the Mexican Golden age of cinema are well known as soldaderas, or indigenous women in the case of the latter, but both are rebozo wearers. Others, from an outside cultural group don't know that the rebozo ever existed in the author's mind while writing these icons into it, because neither the child China Poblana One, Azucena, nor the mother China Poblana Two are wearing one in the pictures that appear in this pictographic novel, and yet Norma Elia Cantú wears rebozos to deliver her readings. As we see, the existence of the rebozo and shade of its presence is implicit in Chicana literature, although many times not named in the literature as such.

Chicana historian Vicki L. Ruíz discusses the soldadera in her book From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America. It is interesting following the previous discussion of Canícula that Ruíz talks about Norma Cantú's theories as a critic: "Norma Cantú posits that Chicano nationalists did not embrace the more historically exact representation of the soldadera as a soldier in her own right, but instead clung to the popular stereotype perpetuated by the Mexican cinema in which "Pedro Armendariz rides into the next battle as Dolores del Río follows—on foot." She adds about the soldadera and Chicana consciousness:

But women, too, embraced this icon. The soldadera embodied a conflicted middle ground between loyalist and feminist, one that could be fiercely independent, yet strongly male-identified. The newspaper El Rebozo from San Antonio, Texas, was written by women, put on by women, distributed by women, and was undertaken for the purpose of uniting our people to work for La Causa. Yet even the name El Rebozo literally and figuratively wraps Chicana consciousness within the bosom of the soldadera. As the editors explained:

El Rebozo—the traditional garment of the Mexican woman, with its many uses, symbolizes the three roles of the Chicana, portraying her as “la señorita,” feminine yet humble; as “la revolucionaria,” ready to fight for “La Causa,” and finally portraying the role of “La Madre” radiant with life.” (Ruiz III-112)

This is the way the rebozo was seen in the 1970s by feminist Chicanas. We are fortunately able to add new dimensions and holographic doors to this important and symbolic Mexican/Chicano icon in our communities, literature, art, and criticism. May the rebozo continue to aggrandize its value in our everyday American lives as we enter the twenty first century with it over our shoulders, under our feet, over our heads, on our hips, covering our breasts as we nurse ourselves into Chicana representation, and in our memories and future artistic and academic undertakings.

Endnotes

1. Herlinda Cancino publishes “Las Lechugueras,” a short paper and photos in Coyolxauhqui Re-Membered, a women’s journal out of San Francisco State University in 1996 in which she discusses the lechuguera. Her pictures of the lechuguera that look like she is wearing a rebozo over her face to protect herself from the pesticides is almost interchangeable with that of the Zapatista woman printed on the aforementioned poster.

2. Pedro Castillo in Mexico in Los Angeles, Richard Griswold del Castillo in La Familia, Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez in La Chicana, María Herrera-Sobek in The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis, David Montejano in Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986, and Elizabeth Salas in Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History all visually portray women wearing rebozos during the Mexican Revolution.

3. Tlatelolco is a historical square in Mexico City also called “La Plaza de las Tres Culturas,” significant because it evidences the rich historical background of Mexico and Mexicans. The three cultures are a

pyramid from pre-Columbian times, a colonial building and a modern twentieth century building. This is also the place where in October the 1968 massacre of many students took place.

4. Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano writes an excellent paper on Chicana lesbian Chabela Vargas in The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality, edited by Bonnie Zimmerman.

5. In Living Islam, Akbar S. Ahmed discusses the veil in Muslim countries and states: “It may well be that seclusion and veiling reflected the upper-class, urban women who would protect themselves from the gaze of those in the bazaars and in the fields”(149).

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