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Performing Identity: Denise Chávez's *Face of an Angel*

by

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Performing Identity: Denise Chávez's *Face of an Angel*

In *Face of an Angel*, New Mexico writer and actress Denise Chávez’s most influential work, Chicanas negotiate patterns and roles they have inherited from their mothers. Protagonist Soveida Dosamantes attempts to break away from dysfunctional entanglements in her culture, but never at the expense of abandoning her heritage. She approaches patriarchy in a quietly subversive manner: through acts of remembrance and performance, Soveida re-members and re-forms her identity through critical observation of other women in her life.

Chávez’s fiction gives voice to those not normally occupying center stage. They are women involved in traditional roles of service, adopting “supporting roles” in society’s dominant ideologies. These characters, like Camus’ Sisyphus, are able to perform their roles in life without being submerged by them. Furthermore, they are learning to employ a form of resistance within a *force relation* in Foucauldian terms, demonstrating that power functions within a social field, not to be overcome only through a sturdy, isolated conscience in the tradition of Camus.

This project attempts to place Soveida’s struggle in *Face of an Angel* in the context of contemporary Chicana literature. As a movement, Chicana literature and theory has, in part due to Gloria Anzaldúa’s landmark *Borderlands/La Frontera*, remained non-reductive. Each author, then, is simultaneously seizing identity within Chicana discourse and helping to form the discourse itself. In much the same way, Chávez’s characters search to define their own identities as servers and expand the concept of what it means culturally to be a server. This multiplicity allows Soveida to remain confident in her identity as she pours new material into an old mold, making “server” into a subversion and a proud fate, thereby recasting cultural inheritance and consciousness to form a new framework for identity. It is, in fact, the individual performance of these societal roles that give the women in Chávez’s fiction their power.
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*Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar.*
(Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.)

-Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*

In many contemporary Chicana stories, female characters review their pasts in an effort to shape their futures (as in works by Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Helena Maria Viramontes). The characters’ recursive searches for identity appear as personal stories presenting small pockets of Chicana life, but elicit attention for their subtext: the social, cultural, and political reality of a doubly-marginalized Chicana. Norma Alarcón notes that a female subject who desires to speak from a role other than “wife/mother” or future “wife/mother” must negotiate a crisis of meaning, beginning with her own gendered personal identity and its relation to others. She also asserts that commonly accepted ideologies view the “wife/mother” role as inflexible, subordinate, and self-denying. Women who wish to marry and/or raise children but not play out these traditional expectations find themselves stuck in a similar crisis of meaning: “Paradoxically... a crisis of meaning can ensue even in the case of a female who may have never aspired to
speak from a different position than that of a wife/mother” (Alarcón, “Making Familia” 221).

In the fiction of Denise Chávez, we must broaden Alarcón’s “wife/mother” to include “server” in order to understand how Soveida Dosamantes, the protagonist in Chávez’s most recent novel, *Face of an Angel*, occupies the same paradoxical framework that Alarcón illuminates. In her search for identity, Soveida chooses to become a server and mother, but does not accept the hackneyed interpretation of these roles as useless and devoid of value. Soveida manages a unique and delicate balance: she speaks from within the traditional position of server, yet manages to combat the socio-political standards of the borderland culture.

With Chávez, there are no definitive solutions to the dilemma of how to self-determine one’s identity, independent of a racist and patriarchal heritage. Nonetheless, Chávez does not lead us to believe it is this “heritage that dictates [Soveida’s] identity” as the journal *Hispanic* tells us (Moscoso 1). Nor is Chávez’s fiction a bitter response to an inevitable oppression. Instead, *Face of an Angel* celebrates Soveida as the most successful of a spectrum of 1980’s Chicana characters who, each in her own inevitably flawed manner, pours new material into an old mold, thereby recasting cultural inheritance and consciousness to form a new framework for identity.

Initially, Soveida believes that she can combat social oppression even from the position of server through what we might call an “existential” approach to her work—taking pride in her position, independent of how others perceive her role.
However, because Soveida is enmeshed within the borderland culture, not removed from society the way Camus describes the isolated Sisyphus, a shift in individual consciousness alone will not grant liberation. Foucault offers help through his theory of resistance from within the power structure. Theories on the formation of the subject by Diana Fuss and Judith Butler may also inform a reader’s interpretation, for throughout her search for identity, Soveida identifies with others, producing self-recognition (Fuss), and is subjected by others ("subordinated by power" in Butler’s words). Soveida’s own way of combating subjection is through rearticulation of old roles. While holding on to the role of server and mother, she approaches patriarchy in a seemingly passive, but determinedly subversive, manner. By the end of the book, through acts of remembrance and performance, Soveida has re-membered and re-formed her identity—her very self—through careful, critical observation of other women in her life.

* * *
Every novel, rightly understood, is an autobiography.

-Anatole France

Face of an Angel is quietly political; it is worthwhile to examine the sources of this in Chávez’s background. Traditionally, work options for Mexican-Americans (Chicanos) in the borderland culture are few. Their marginalization stems from a combination of historical, religious, and cultural factors; their social and professional experiences have been well documented1. Elena Poniatowska, Mexico’s leading woman writer and journalist, states, “Chicanos are caught between two worlds that reject them: Mexicans who consider them traitors for abandoning the homeland, and Americans who want them only as cheap labor” (37).2 A particular type of marginalization, developing from these historical factors plus the cultural presence of machismo, affects ChicanA’s3 (Orozco 12-14).

The Chicana political movement challenges a society that allows gender to determine work, and allows work to determine individual power and value, thereby relegating women “to a status of inferiority and invisibility” (Córdova 2).

Chávez (b. 1948) grew up in this patriarchal culture, on the northern side of the United States-Mexico border. Any number of environmental factors could have squelched her desire to become an artist. Yet, in each case she successfully resisted by recasting her own creative version of traditional paradigms of womanhood. First, Chávez often begins public lectures by referring to the all-girls, Catholic high school she attended in New Mexico. Her schoolmates became a group of young women united under the Catholic Church’s strict guidelines. Precisely because it was a source of oppression, their school became a place of
bonding and empowerment. For example, there were exactly twelve students in her graduating class; they called themselves “The Apostlettes.” Although they were not intentionally acting out any theory of resistance, the students’ self-given nickname serves as a precursor for the subversive humor and grace with which the women in Chávez’s fiction approach patriarchy in general. The nickname is still clearly connected to religion, and demonstrates that a sense of community is vital to her definition of self. By adapting this way, within established structures, she has been able to make important changes without entirely disposing of her culture.

Part of Chávez’s strength to combat racism and patriarchy stems from a metaphor from her teenage days. The first time she seriously faced the question, “Who am I?” she was in the protective sub-culture of her all-girls high school. There, in marked contrast to the surrounding Chicano culture, nobody told her she couldn't write, act, or otherwise express herself through the arts. So, she did. Ironically, in her quest to “be somebody,” she found herself in theater - a place where the goal is to act like somebody else. By imagining what life is like for others, she was better able to understand her own life, and her relationship to those around her.

When applied to Chávez, the work of Slavoj Zizek shows how important this initiation into performance may have been for Chávez’s developing sense of self. From a Slovenian Lacanian perspective, he writes, “insisting on a false mask brings us nearer to a true, authentic subjective position than throwing off the mask and displaying our ‘true face’ . . . [T]here is more truth in a mask than in what is hidden beneath it: a mask is never simply ‘just a mask’” (Zizek 33-34). Similarly,
during the struggle to redefine Chicana individual and collective identity, Chávez recognizes performance art as a source of strength and encouragement. Chicanas need not devalue the roles they play, whether wife, mother, server, or any other role; performance is a first step toward subversion. Zizek concludes, rather existentially, "[T]he only authenticity at our disposal is that of impersonation, of ‘taking our act (posture) seriously’" (34). This Lacanian analysis may seem an overstatement, as it does not acknowledge the social influences on the power of impersonation; however, when it is coupled with Chávez’s consistent use of performance metaphors within the social context of the novel, it leads one to reanalyze the dialectic relationship between performance and power.

Acting has also helped Chávez look past another potential source of bitterness, her Catholic upbringing. When asked during a theater workshop about the religious altar on stage, Chávez replied that although her spiritual and academic education was flooded with images of male superiority, she has not altogether discarded her allegiance to the Catholic faith. Instead, she said she remains grateful for the lessons she did learn from the church: "Religion was important then as spirituality is to me now" ("Heat" 29). She prays to the few female images that hold great significance for her; central to her faith is Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Today, Chávez writes in the same room where she was born, in her house in Las Cruces, New Mexico. However, she is careful not to reproduce what she calls “dysfunctional patterns” of Chicano life that remain in her world (author’s interview). Through her fiction, as in her life, Chávez embraces and nurtures parts of her culture while still critiquing and subverting it.
According to Chicana scholars and writers, this is a large task. Mexican American women in literature have continuously been relegated to the roles of the muse, the wife, or the mother (Alarcón, “The Sardonic Powers” 6). Reactions to this relegation have taken multiple forms, creating a crisis of identity for the movement, as Chicana writers try to “articulate the complexities of their struggle for representation” (Rebolledo 101). Cherrie Moraga lauds the recent progress of Chicana writers as they make the pages of Chicano, feminist, and literary publications. Fifteen years ago, when Moraga’s influential *Loving in the War Years* emerged, the strength of the Chicana writers’ movement lay in the work of writers with “a relentless commitment to putting the female first, even when it means criticizing el hombre” (107). This type of literary response to historical and cultural domination has been common, and expressed through bitter, scathing voices. These writers have passed the point of “awakening”; they have explored the traditions, recognized their oppression, and begun to fight patriarchy with firm, wide-open eyes. Lorna Dee Cervantes boldly declares a personal revolution in her very title: “You Cramp My Style, Baby.” This poem first illuminates and then defies the Chicana role as sex object and docile servant to the male lord and master.

Similar representations of anger in Chicana literature are pervasive. Tough, unforgiving artists are fighting back against oppression—they feed on and find power in a new role: the victim. Without discrediting the significance of these literary works, we must realize the key to understanding Chávez is that *Face of an Angel* does not employ this victim-trope. It is, in contrast, a celebratory book.
Humor is a key factor in the novel, and immediately causes Chávez to stand out from many Chicana writers. The *friendly* words printed on the inner flap of the paperback are apt: it is a “festival of entertainment,” “uplifting,” “exuberant,” and “humorous.” Chávez herself points out that the novel illuminates the weaknesses of her male and her female characters equally: “It is as harsh on women as on men” (author’s interview). At public readings, audiences are rolling in the aisles. She is flamboyant, she is bawdy, and she has come a long way since her adolescent desire to enter the convent quietly and solemnly. She is performing her life, and writing a new role.

These issues surface immediately in *Face of an Angel*. With Chávez, I believe we are witnessing the next step in the Chicana feminist movement. Women are still—necessarily—celebrated at the forefront of her fiction and poetry. However, they are no longer as free from criticism as Moraga implies women often are in Chicana literature. *Face of an Angel* clearly condemns men for their actions: “Luardo’s sick, sordid life drew us along with it” (71); but in addition, it equally condemns the female characters for their complacency and passivity: “How could I have stood by and listened to all that violence? How?” (209). Silent, compassionate women are just as guilty for society’s “sexual yoke” by passively looking the other way, as men are guilty for fashioning the yoke in the first place (318). In the guise of the loving act of “mothering,” “It is women who have sadly helped to propel the myth forward, into each age, victims of their own supposed mercy . . . . conquered women know no other way” (319). Works which employ
the trampled-upon victim-trope do not implicate women in this way; instead, they often place the blame for gender inequalities exclusively on men. While on the surface *Face of an Angel* is humorous and delightful, it also critiques women involved in traditional service work.

The book is cyclical; it begins with an adult Soveida commenting on the value of her family's past, then it cycles back to remember that history, building up to the present again. This allows Soveida, like other Chicana protagonists, to construct her present identity through a recursive process that both backtracks to reinterpret past influences, and projects forward to her desire for the future.

Chávez's Catholic education informs the novel through a Biblical metaphor: the image of the body of Christ. Each individual is also a part of the whole culture. As Soveida remembers the stories of her grandparents, mother, father, brother, and cousin, she figuratively re-members the components of the body of Christ and her relation to them. Her own identity is closely related to her place in the family and social matrix. She reflects, “The longer I live, the more I see that it is the same life, the same story, the same characters. All of them with the same face” (4). Diana Fuss elaborates on this Catholic metaphor when she posits, in *Identification Papers*, “subjectivity can be most concisely understood as the history of one’s identifications” (34). She defines “identification” as the ongoing process by which people incorporate attractive elements of others in order to fill a fundamental gap within themselves; what is internal is defined by what is external. Though not applying the “body of Christ” metaphor herself, Fuss' work emphasizes the same reliance on “the body” to determine how “the hand” should
behave. A need for others to help determine who they are leads Chicanas to a more communal or even tribal sense of identity—within which it is easy to see how it may be difficult for Soveida to define her individual identity.

Each chapter title follows the holy order of angels: angels, archangels, principalities, powers, virtues, dominations, thrones, cherubim, and seraphim. This progression from Holy to Holiest mirrors the history of the women in Soveida’s family: the power of their voices progresses through the years. Soveida’s grandmother can barely whisper; her mother cries out in rage; Soveida speaks with new life and song (*Face* ii).

In a chapter titled “Saints,” Chávez begins to show the limiting influence a strong Catholic upbringing has on young women. Most female role models in the church are not defined, known, and respected for themselves, but rather for their various relationships with men: “all the good women saints are usually ex-whores or breathless virgins, or old women widowed for many years” (*Face* 56). Even an exception to this, like Saint Joan of Arc, is dismissed as “too aggressive” for Soveida to emulate: “I was indoctrinated into believing that having rounded ample breasts and living in constant fear of having them ripped off was the only way” (57).

The repercussions of a Catholic childhood and education also find their way into Soveida’s first person narrative. As she describes these paradigmatic saints, she is alternately fighting against them and slipping sardonically into the rhetoric of the church doctrine. Certain comments reveal a biting resistance to the status quo: “One rarely hears about [Saint Francis’] counterpart, Saint Claire, or her work. But, then again, most saints are male, except the unfortunate heretofore
mentioned limbless, sightless, wombless, or sexless" (56). Other passages blend that contemptuous tone with the voice of the church. It is as if Catholic doctrine speaks through Soveida at times, but when it does, it comes out sardonically:

John the Baptist is a wild man, not your usual saint. It's always a relief to hear about him at the river. God really loves him, so wildness is okay, if you are a man, or look like a man. You can't be wild and a woman. Look what might happen to you. Burned to death on a spit like a witch. (57)

Judith Butler works out of a Marxist/Foucauldian perspective to examine how social functions and systems of power like the Catholic church both determine the subject and become self-perpetuating. She adds insight to the repercussions of Soveida’s background when she writes, “[t]he very production of the subject is the consequence of a primary subordination” (Butler 20, emphasis added). Soveida’s educational, familial, and cultural influences have all been male-dominated, and together they constitute her “primary subordination.” At the beginning of the novel, Soveida wants a man to “save [her] from [her] shadow-filled world” (Face 131). This is, in essence, desiring her own subjection. Furthermore, each influence that devalues her as a Chicana is actually forming her identity.

Ultimately, however, she wants to confront these shadows, bring them into light, and gain an identity still related to but distinguishable from others. Soveida refuses to exist only in the negative sense of subjection. Slowly, she recognizes the heavy thumb of Catholicism’s paradigm of womanhood. Tentatively, she begins to explore ways to ease out from under it. However, she (like any member of a social
movement) must determine how to push for change while not denying her very existence. In other words, if "woman" is defined by patriarchy, then according to Toril Moi, in the struggle against patriarchy "woman" cannot be at all, other than in a negative sense: "she can only exist negatively, as it were, through the refusal of that which is given" (Alarcón, "Making Familia" 230). The question then becomes, what alternatives exist for Soveida to reject these saintly roles—for clearly she desires to do so—without rejecting her own existence as woman?

One of the possibilities is presented through Soveida's impression of Virginia Lozano, a woman in control of herself rather than under the control of anyone else. Showing no signs of past pain or suffering, and having shirked the responsibility of her children onto their father, "La Virgie" varies radically from any prescribed role for Chicana women:

She was a woman untouched by life's anxieties, unscathed by mortality, chaos, corruption. Every pore was tight, every ounce of her alive. She was firm and beautifully victorious over any physical imperfection. . . . As time went on, she became sexier, funnier, more cheerful, friendlier, and more likable to men. . . (Face 188)

La Virgie plays the role of temptress, seducing men (most notably Soveida's husband) with her friendly, sexy self, and revels in it. Neither she nor her ironic nickname show signs of the trying service, dutiful motherhood, saintly comportment, or silent martyrdom to which the Dosamantes family is accustomed.
In the process of using her sexual power to dominate men, however, La Virgie remains a less than exemplary model of effective resistance to patriarchy. Soveida explicitly denounces the negative effect La Virgie has on other women: "She could be cute, she could be winsome, and she most certainly could be—and was—a bitch. The only people to see this Jekyll/Hyde transformation of hers were generally other women she had already relegated to a place of inconsequence outside her reign" (189). In the process of celebrating her independence from men, La Virgie necessarily oppresses other women. Her "if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em" method of combating oppression will not release her from patriarchy; as Audre Lorde writes, the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house: "They [the tools] may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support" (Lorde 99). Just like the "macho man" Soveida writes about in her term paper for Professor Velásquez, La Virgie must oppress others in order to feel any power herself.

Soveida’s cousin, Mara, decides that the simplest way to deal with the oppressive environment she inherited is to abandon it altogether. Mara’s Mamá Lupita reflects Tita’s Mama Elena in Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*. Both matriarchs are unreasonably strict with the young women, keeping them locked into traditional roles of saintly servitude. Mara flees home because Mamá Lupita will not allow her to attend her senior prom—her chosen date comes from a
family that proper “ladies” do not socialize with. Although Mamá’s power play was the final catalyst for Mara’s reaction, the societal expectations of Chicana women—her “primary subordination”—lurk behind Mamá’s apparently unreasonably strict ruling. Mara understands this: “It’s not the dance, it’s—”. But she barely begins to express this before she is silenced: “Get a hold of yourself, Mara. . . We are not going to talk now” (95).

Like Esperanza, the protagonist from Sandra Cisneros’s now canonical *The House on Mango Street*, Mara decides to get out: “someday I’ll move away and never come back” (*Face* 94). The difference is that Esperanza, like a Buddhist enlightened one, explicitly states she will return for “the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (Cisneros 110). Mara, however, makes no effort to change the borderland culture; she only removes herself from it. The family is still hurt by Mara’s abandonment even at the close of the novel, twenty-five years later.

Mara is also stuck in a paradox. She wants a system to change, but will have nothing to do with the system. Ironically, Mara’s bold action during her senior year of high school becomes ineffectual in the long run; by removing herself from the cycles she has no agency to change the cycles. Mara’s solution is to flee, while Esperanza’s solution is to leave and come back; Soveida’s path, as one sees, involves never leaving in the first place.

Years later, Soveida and Mara often analyze their disparate life choices during telephone conversations. They grew up in the same household, but Mara has chosen a career in the previously male-dominated business world, away from any form of physical labor. Mara considers herself a success, having overcome a
childhood of “lies and nightmares.” However, she dwells on the fact that she experienced atrocities.

‘[My past] was cruel, don’t forget it. It’s that way for all women, Soveida, so wake up! I hate to see you play the same damn role that your mother played, Soveida, bowing to all the men who come into your life and then scraping up their crusty filth and saying thank you, sir.’ (Face 53)

As a self-started businesswoman, Mara can’t understand Soveida’s choice of a service-occupation. She has, by her own estimation, gained power through working in the realm of ideas, concepts, and statistics (270). As Soveida reflects on her cousin’s accusations, we get a glimpse of Soveida’s resistance to the traditional concept of server as well as her resistance to Mara’s role of victim. Waiting tables has indeed taught Soveida something about “real life”: it has taught her that cycles do not mandate repetition. “Ours was a history of lies. Someone’s invention of what a family should be. And yet, Mara, I wanted to tell her, we are undoing the lies, you and I (53).

Soveida acknowledges the domination and the lies, but she also recognizes that by harboring anger about the past, her cousin perpetuates the suffering. She acknowledges “how individuals who are the targets of this power can play a role in its construction and its demise” (Sawicki 13, emphasis added). Mara, named from the Hebrew word for “bitter” (Face 407), contributes to the construction of patriarchy by diminishing the value of the server role. Soveida wants her help in working toward its demise, working toward a new construction, reflecting a
modern version of Emerson’s praise of imperturbable people: “People say sometimes, ‘see what I have overcome... see how completely I have triumphed over these black events.’ Not if they still remind me of the black event. True conquest is the causing the calamity to fade and disappear as an early cloud of insignificant result in a history so large and advancing” (Emerson 1536). Cultural injustice ("calamity") is far from "insignificant"; rather, it is the original impetus for change. But injustice cannot be thwarted by dwelling on it. Even Mamá, whose obstinace caused Mara to leave, reiterates Emerson’s idea in her own typically succinct manner: “she’ll eventually have to let it go... She has to. Or it will kill her. It’s as simple as that” (Face 446).

For Soveida, piecing herself together by reviewing her family history is complex. Multiple and even contradictory identifications can (and do) exist in the subject simultaneously. This ambivalence is augmented by a “double current”: the subject can simultaneously admire and despise the object it identifies with (Fuss 34). Soveida identifies with Mara’s refusal to live with the violence in the Dosamantes family. An identification process incorporates Mara’s high standards into Soveida’s own sense of self. However, Soveida also despises Mara’s abandonment and bitterness—direct results of that very refusal she identifies with. Those characteristics are not ones with which Soveida identifies. Similarly, while the idea of being self-sufficient like La Virgie attracts Soveida, doing so at the expense of others repulses her. This double current generates fragmentation and confusion in the subject—reflected in Soveida questioning her identity “What I saw in the mirror this morning chilled and frightened me. Behind my face were so
many other faces, all of them changing before my eyes. Which one was my real face? The face that I knew I could accept and love?” (*Face* 297).

In “The Boogeyman” chapter, when Soveida and Mara discuss their family's sordid past, Soveida realizes that as a result of a fragmentation of self caused by contradictory identifications, people are more susceptible to domination by others. The most harmful subjection, however, comes not from Luardo, not from their husbands, bosses or professors, but from themselves: “I wanted to make her understand once and for all—there was no boogeyman, no boogeywoman, no imaginary darkened face across the room, peering at us from the window or in the mirror, but *ourselves*, saying yes, why not, go on, suffer.” (*Face* 53). Soveida recognizes herself as a part of her own subjection. As Chicanas accept subservient roles with passivity, as they remain silent in the face of violence and oppression, they are reiterating the power structure’s dominating force. During this phone conversation, Soveida reacts to what Butler would call the splitting of the subject and the subject’s turning on oneself. Likewise, her father also internalizes cultural oppression when he advises Soveida not to marry a Mexican because they are “lower class” (*Face* 38). This type of self-domination or internalized powerlessness leads to perpetuation of the power struggle instead of leading toward self-determination.

Soveida tries to reason with her cousin:

‘Maybe someday things will change, Mara. Then we won’t have any minorities. People won’t think because you’re black you’ll get a job cleaning offices, or because you’re Latino you’ll
clean bathrooms, or because you’re young you’ll work in fast-food restaurants, or because you’re old you’ll sweep the hallways.’

[Mara answers,] ‘Oh, yeah? I don’t think so. As long as there is life, there’ll be slaves, like Oralia and Chata, and the other one, what’s her name?’

‘Oh, Mara, you’re wrong. They’re not slaves, they’re women who serve. There’s a difference. You just don’t get it. (270)

La Virgie and Mara’s presence illuminates the choices Soveida makes by providing a concrete example of people who have chosen alternatives. Considering Soveida in the cultural context from which she evolved, one realizes that this character’s choices are distinct: they differ from the thousands of Chicanas who have turned bitter, from the victimized, angry poets, and of course, from those women who serve obliviously, passively or angrily because they do not possess the strength, courage, support or awareness to do otherwise.

In contrast to La Virgie and Mara, several characters choose to remain in service roles, and act as models for Soveida to identify with. Milia, Chata, and Oralia adopt their roles as servers in the same way that actors assume supporting roles in performances. Simply because they are not center-stage does not mean they should not perform their roles with honor; doing so, they achieve a sense of power well beyond survival wages.

Like Sisyphus, the ultimate existential hero, these Chávez characters confer upon themselves virtue and dignity while performing otherwise menial tasks.
When the gods condemned Sisyphus to an eternal, useless task—rolling a rock over and over again to the top of a mountain—it was because exerting one’s entire being toward accomplishing nothing was the most dreadful penalty they could imagine. Sisyphus is conscious of his endless, futile, fate; there would be no punishment if he thought he might actually succeed.

But Camus reconceptualizes the true effect of such “punishment.” As Sisyphus returns to the rock to begin his struggle anew, Camus explains, “that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when [Sisyphus] leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock” (97). The only way for Sisyphus to overcome his fate is to transform his consciousness from a sense of torture to a sense of victory: “Crushing truths perish from being acknowledged” (98). Camus ignores the repercussions of a maintaining this type of false ideology, claiming that it is through acknowledging his position and adopting his fate as his own (rather than cringing under the weight of fate-as-punishment) that Sisyphus finds joy.

The Chávez characters’ plights are similar. Servers work every day at the same unending tasks. Once one table has been served, another group sits down to be waited on. Finishing one cleaning job may bring temporary satisfaction, but housemaids remain conscious that their work will be undone, the task will begin again. This working-class fate, Camus says, “is no less absurd” than Sisyphus’ predicament (97). Like Sisyphus, Milia, Oralia and Chata do not merely inherit their service roles; they adapt them. By accepting their fated jobs as chosen, they are no longer subject to any dictating higher destiny—not racism, not patriarchy
Within the context of individual consciousness, then, each of these women is in control of her days, and the service work becomes a noble struggle. Camus definitively concludes, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (99).

Her first day at El Farol Mexican Restaurant, Soveida works with Milia, who has been waiting tables since “before you were born” (Face 108). The two women—separated by a generation—are now united through a whirling dance of preparation for their day at work: drying silverware, setting tables, and filling Tabasco bottles. Milia’s instructions reveal a sense of pride and even superiority in her job: “A person who listens is a good waitress, remember that. . . . There are so many degrees of sound. Like a musician, you’ll come to know them all” (106). There is even a strain of divine inspiration in Milia’s words that reveal the spiritual side of her concept of service:

‘Soveida, you’re more than a bus girl. You’re more than my assistant. You’re the left hand of God extended. I say the left hand because I don’t want to be so presumptuous to say the right hand. Only God can act with the right hand. I am God’s left hand and you, Soveida, are God’s left hand extended.’ (Face 106)

Clearly, this job has given Milia a strong sense of purpose, adding confidence to her identity. Although she is on the service end of the marketplace, she has taken that role and assigned it significance. In doing so, Milia is able to transcend her impoverished and uneducated background. A higher destiny dictated her mother’s premature death and her father’s poverty. But it is Milia herself who dictates how she performs her role, capitalizing on the two strengths she does possess: silence
and the power of her hands. Echoing Camus’ assessment of each atom of
Sisyphus’ stone, which “in itself forms a world” (Camus 99), Milia concludes,
“‘Anyone would walk in here and just see tables, with people sitting around them
eating. I look around and I see a world. A complete world’” (Face 109). It is her
own quiet revolution: Milia is able to conquer her world by first actually
conceiving of it as a world. Then she completes this co-option of “work” by
embracing a new role as head choreographer of the El Farol Restaurant Ballet.

Oralia, like Milia, co-opts her “destined” role as server so that it is fulfilling
for her. There is no doubt that this housemaid believes she had no more control in
choosing her occupation than Sisyphus did in selecting his task: “I am a servant.
Your mother’s silent sister. I work for her. My destiny was this family, and Mamá
Lupita” (308). Although she could not control her “destiny,” Oralia can change
her conscious interpretation of the role. She views herself as queen of various
domains. Soveida describes her as “wonderful company” “famous for her
medicinal teas” and “an excellent masseuse” (141). In addition, everyone is aware
that although the house belongs to Mamá, the kitchen is Oralia’s, and the kitchen
functions as “the heart of Mamá’s house” (142). In each of these realms, Oralia
transforms her tasks by performing them well:

When she wasn’t cooking, she was busy cleaning the pebbles out of a
pot of beans, weeding her garden patiently every day, or sweeping
the ground in front of Mamá’s house until the earth shone like skin,
work she found joyful and never monotonous. She performed her
tasks with a sense of novelty, even if it was for the thousandth time
and she knew every nuance and permutation of the job at hand. (141)

Oralia has been Mamá’s domestic servant for over sixty years, and performs her
work indefatigably. Meanwhile, she denies that it is “work” the way Soveida
interprets the word (308).

Nonetheless, beginning with Oralia and continuing with Chata, one begins
to doubt that Camus’ definitive conclusion, “We must imagine Sisyphus happy,”
holds entirely true for these women. Oralia expresses a slight sense of longing to
be set free from her unending tasks; her folk sayings reveal dissatisfaction: “Even if
the monkey dresses in silk, she will still be a monkey” (448). Real work,
particularly in the borderland culture, is not as easy as Camus makes it seem.
Sisyphus, an isolated individual, differs greatly from these servers immersed in a
complex social matrix; only in myth can consciousness completely determine
happiness. Marx’s assertion that “the conditions of existence determine
consciousness” also rings true, in which case Soveida is perpetuating established
power structures by willingly filling a low-paying, subjugated role. Camus is not
concerned with the way our consciousness is socially formed, and Chicana
consciousness is nothing if not social.

Oralia describes her role in the marketplace as “Each monkey on its little
string, and I on mine” (323). Inherent in her wistful tone is her desire to be set
free from a rigid power structure, or at least the desire for women to have more
options and security when it comes time to choose to which “string” they will be
attached. While Milia, Oralia and Chata are portrayed as strong, confident
women, they are *still* the servers, and largely unappreciated or valued. Their creative negotiation of the service sphere may lead them to feel fulfilled, but their quiet approach to personal deliverance lacks cultural, economical, or political impact. When will Chicanas—in fiction or in the world—be able to *choose* their roles instead of being saddled with them as Sisyphus was?

Michel Foucault, working out of Paris only forty years after Camus, adds the reality of culturally reproduced power relations to Sisyphus’ stoic, isolated stance. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault defines power as something exercised, not something possessed. Power is productive, not repressive, and works from the bottom-up, not from the top-down. In *Face*, the male owner of El Farol Restaurant does not “have power” over the female servers, nor do the waitresses “have power” over the bus-people. Instead, all of the workers and customers are involved in a *force relation*. This relational model of identity recognizes the individual and the social field as dynamic, multidimensional sets of relationships “containing possibilities for liberation as well as domination” (Sawicki 9). Chuy’s employment negotiation after the “night of the cuca’s” and the restaurant staff’s fight for benefits with the employee meals exemplify this theory at work.

Each ChicanA character intends to control her relationship with others (particularly, but not exclusively, with men) in different ways. Although Soveida occupies a service role, she refuses to perform the role in the way that traditional economics of oppression would prescribe: “Soveida is striving for better things, striving to break away from dysfunctional patterns and entanglements” (author’s
interview). If we reconceptualize power as coming from below, that is, with “no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations” (Foucault 94), new possibilities to resist the established force relation open up. It becomes possible for Soveida and others to resist patriarchy and racism, and establish their own agency by working within the established power structure.

Butler’s sense of effective resistance to domination rests at this point. Through a rearticulation of the subject as subject (in this case, the re-acceptance and re-negotiation of the service role), the subject reaches a secluded but imperative space, free from subversion, in which it can recast the power relations of which it is a part, and “perform” identity. If exercised properly, then, a position of subjection can be a position of power—“the last shall be first and the first shall be last” (Face 381). There may be escape from Alarcón’s paradoxical crisis of meaning, after all, as private consciousness and assertions of self transform the social sphere.

Foucault’s theory of power, of course, can be read as a discourse that itself exercises a dominating power through its elitist academic analyses. Although there are some clear examples in Chávez’s fiction, Foucauldian force relations are often difficult to decipher in the “real world.” Despite the fact that power can be productive, it has also been shown to be repressive. It is what each character in Face does within the power field that is most telling.

Chata has made the most progress toward successful resistance within this power field. To use a phrase from Virginia Woolf, she is standing on the
shoulders of Chicana servers before her, like Milia and Oralia. She not only values her own work, but also demands that others grant her what she is worth, risking unemployment. Like Oralia, Chata takes control of the work process: “Everything would be in its place, or rather the place Chata feels it belongs. Because it’s Chata who orders where the knives should be stored and what system will work best in each cabinet . . .” (211). Cleanliness is the highest virtue to these women, and Chata exemplifies this even in the meticulous details of her dress. Her calm and tenderness at the beginning of the work day—especially in contrast with Soveida’s rushed, forgetful thoughts—show a reverence for the work to come. Her cleaning, performed with “effortless concentration, efficiency, and speed” (211), shows expertise.

Different, however, is the manner in which Chata graduates from the “Ni Modo” philosophy of Oralia. Instead of accepting various jobs because she “might as well” (288), she demands respect from her patronas and even leaves jobs that are not fulfilling. Because, as Mary Romero points out, “class and race antagonisms are played out at an interpersonal level” between the domestic worker and her employee (31), Chata’s negotiations with and attitudes toward her patronas provide another individual site to examine Foucauldian power relations. Oppression of servers can be dispensed by women as well as men, as exemplified by the abuse accorded to Chata while working for Soveida’s maternal grandmother, Doña Trancha. For four months, Chata worked from six in the morning to sunset, with no breaks or food to sustain her. “Who wants to live like a prostituta en el infierno? . . . She was too mean to change and I just knew
something else was waiting for me” (213).

Next, Chata worked for Soveida's paternal grandmother, where working conditions were only slightly better. Instead, she soon began to work for “las americanas”:

I don’t have anything against my own people, except they don’t feed you or pay you what you’re worth. The men run after you when their wives are gone . . . and the women, I speak from experience, don’t have no pity for you if anything goes wrong. They start on how you’re a mexicana and nobody from México can do anything right and how mexicanas can’t be trusted . . . they forget they’re mexicanas, too . . . Me cansé. I got tired of working for no money and for people who don’t appreciate me. . . . After all these years of not eating with the mexicanas, now with the gringas I can eat. (213-14)

As Foucault says, power also comes from below. From Chata's perspective, the situation is not only economically better, but also psychologically beneficial. Through a type of resistance that takes great strength (she had no other job at the time she quit working for Doña Trancha), Chata creates new options for herself within the broader category of “server,” thereby maintaining her dignity. Race and gender oppression are “embedded in social relationships, not intrinsic to the work itself” (Romero 29), and therefore it is possible for Chata to re-create her own significance through the work she performs. Soveida realizes that “beyond the work was the value of the person working” (Face 304, emphasis added).
Sister Lizzie ultimately provides Soveida with the most successful model of how to pursue the ideals of service without being submerged by them. When the two friends meet during Happy Hour at the Holiday Inn, Lizzie drains margaritas as she explains why she loves her work. As a nun, her ministry is an active one, not a cloistered existence or even relegated to the realms of teaching—"barricaded behind school desks"—or nursing—"holding steaming urinals" (Face 440). She marched against the Vietnam War, joined the Revolutionary Communist Party, and took up the struggle against AIDS, all in the name of service: "What greater trial is there today than to live honestly and with love in a time of plague?" (440).

As Soveida listens to Sister Lizzie's ruminations, she realizes her own shortcomings in the face of so many aspects of social justice: unlike Lizzie, she muses, "My struggles always seem to come too late. . . . Lizzie served the world in a way in which I didn't think I ever could" (440-444). Again, it is through remembering that the two women come to new realizations about themselves. Reflecting on Sister Emilia Marie, the principal at their Catholic high school years ago, Soveida and Lizzie realize that love is action, and inseparable from service. Inherently, both involve suffering. Whether Soveida builds bridges over the suffering is—crucially—up to her. "My grandmother and mother never really broke their chain of bondage to men. So I suppose I am only one more bead in that never-ending rosary of need" (445). During this final encounter with Sister Lizzie, however, Soveida identifies with a way to stop chanting a desperate
“rosary” through her relations with men. Now, Soveida can confront Tirzio on her own, honest terms.⁸

Although multiple identifications have the capacity to “[prevent] identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given” (Fuss 2), the identification process in this scene helps Soveida re-articulate her identity partly because it travels a two-way street: “At that moment I knew everything was all right, and would always be all right, because we shared the same story” (Face 446). Viewing this as a positive identification provides another space where Soveida can escape the paradoxical crisis of identity that Alarcón discussed. In Fuss’ words, “identity is actually an identification come to light” (2).

While piecing together her identity from all these women, from this point on, like Rocío in the Chávez short story “Shooting Stars,” Soveida will look to herself to answer, “What did it mean to be a woman? To be beautiful, complete?” (Menu 53). She is like Rocío—she wants, ultimately, not to be one of these women, but to be parts of them, and in doing so, be herself. Both Rocío and Soveida experience epiphanies during which their own voices come into positions of agency. Just as Rocío’s older sister Ronelia awakens her to her self (Menu 63), so Sister Lizzie reaffirms for Soveida the power of her own identity. Her new concept of “self” is not independent from its relation to others, but it is no longer subordinate to them, even in the chosen role of service and motherhood (Face 446). She determines, “I want peace. And the only person who can give me that is I” (344), and has the same wish for her daughter, Milagro (“miracle” in English)
as the book closes: "In a room crowded with other women, she will always be herself" (399).
In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action.

-Audre Lourde, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never...’

Although political action may be only one among several aspects of Face of an Angel, Chávez claims, “It is political... I’m a writer of the American experience” (Interview). Chávez’s characters’ personal progressions lay the groundwork for political progress. Her novel focuses on everyday events, but for these characters, everyday events are the scenes of not only personal but also social struggle. What occurs at these local sites of power relations represents larger socio-political structures. While not necessarily answering which comes first, Chata notes the relationship between what occurs behind closed doors and what occurs in public:

If a person is stingy in their own home, imagine how they are out in the world? If they screw you in the kitchen, what will happen in the street? Just because you see their filth on the inside doesn't mean you are filth if you wipe it away... if you’re pushing me to get me mad I will. (Face 214)

Face represents the personal side of an emerging consciousness of the Chicana feminist movement that began serious political resistance in the 1980’s. Minority discourses tend to claim solidarity in a reductive manner; the Chicana writers and critics, however, mainly find unity through their differences. Literal and metaphorical borderlands (countries, cultures, languages...) exist not only in daily life, but in theoretical discourses of mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa,
Borderlands). Soveida’s search for identity parallels this cultural position of multiplicity, at times reflected in a shifting narrative technique. Chávez’s contribution to the American political conversation lies in her fictional presentation of a burgeoning sense of Chicana identity that has come to fruition in the 1990’s.

In this manner, Face of an Angel questions roles that Chicana women have inherited from their mothers. It does not suggest that all Chicanas reject the roles of wife, mother, and server; rather, it provides new conceptions of how to negotiate these roles. The protagonists in Chávez’s fiction “perform” the way that actors do, struggling to reconcile their internal desires with the societal expectations placed on them as Mexican American women. Chávez’s emphasis on the relationship between being a performance artist and a literary artist, in addition to the creation of a powerfully self-aware protagonist like Soveida, suggest a strong relationship between the ability to “perform” one’s identity, and socio-political resistance.

Chávez has accomplished what she establishes as the goal of art: “good writers transcend backgrounds.” Her text paradoxically depends on the borderland culture and breaks the boundaries of that environment to reconsider power relations. These characters “are both victims and agents within systems of domination” (Sawicki 10). It is, in fact, the individual’s choosing to perform these societal roles that gives the women in Chávez’s fiction their joy, their endurance... and their power.
Notes

1. For overviews of gender inequalities in the Mexican American population, I referred to Elena Poniatowska, "Mexicanas and Chicanas"; Mary Romero’s *Maid in the USA*; the socio-historic perspective of Rosaura Sanchez’s *Chicano Discourse*; and Norma Cantú’s "Women, then and Now: An Analysis of the Adelita Image versus the Chicana as Political Writer and Philosopher ."

2. A literary expression of the same sense of de-centering appears in Pat Mora’s "Legal Alien."

3. When necessary, I have adopted Tey Diana Rebolledo’s use of the capital "A" in "ChicanA" to clearly distinguish in writing the *female* Mexican-American population.

4. See, among others, the work of Lydia Camarillo, Alma E. Cervantes, Lorna Dee Cervantes, La Chrisx, Margarita Cota-Cárdenas, Naomi Quiñónez.

5. Ellen McCracken explains that Esperanza has to learn this approach; initially, like Mara, her refusal of one instance of "woman’s work" merely creates more work for another woman, perpetuating oppressive gender roles rather than affecting change.

6. Woolfe, *A Room of One’s Own."

7. The "Ni Modo" philosophy, an accepted notion in the borderland culture, is defined by Soveida as "a phrase meaning that a person accepts what can’t be undone; in other words, there’s nothing you can do about it, let it go, accept it, might as well" (288).

8. The climactic significance of this scene is clear from its reference to imminent rain. Chávez’s poetry is soaked with rain imagery, and an autobiographical essay, "Heat and Rain: testimonio," demonstrates the significance of rain in her own life.

9. See *Face* chapter 33, pp. 241-244, where the narration slides in and out of first-person, third-person, and stream-of-consciousness perspectives.
Works Cited


