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by

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**“I Wanted My Tiara, Damn It”: Queer Kinship and Drag Royalty in
Felicia Luna Lemus’ *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties***

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Report

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Dedication

In remembrance of tea parties long-passed with my granny Frieda Ruth Branson, who
taught me how to make believe.

For my momma Kim Hanson, who taught me to how to believe in myself.

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Abstract

“I Wanted My Tiara, Damn It”: Queer Kinship and Drag Royalty in Felicia Luna Lemus’ *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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This paper traces La Llorona’s evolution from ancient Aztec cosmology to *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, a contemporary novel by Felicia Luna Lemus. I argue that the protagonist’s entrenchment in her own Llorona myth ultimately inhibits the development of a queer community in collaboration with the community of her birth. While *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* leaves the tension between familial duty and personal desire unresolved, the constant narrative oscillation between past tea parties with Leti’s grandmothers and present tea parties with Leti’s chosen lesbian *familia* opens a space for new kinship structures to emerge, remapping the contours of the Mexican-American family and a woman’s role within it.

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“Buckle Up, Doll”

The narrator of Felicia Luna Lemus’ *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* barrels into the novel full-tilt, pulling readers alongside her with a gift for gab that jumps the page with breathless orality and addresses the reader directly: “Buckle up, doll. I promise I’ll try not to tangle your quinceañera dress. We’ll get to the ball soon enough” (Lemus 3). And we are indeed in for a ride, even if the dress is not likely to survive the trip. Set in Southern California during the 1980s, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* follows 25-year-old Leti Torrez from the obscure Californian border town of her youth where she is raised by her grandmother Nana Lupe and great-grandmother Mama Estrella, to film school where she explores her lesbian sexuality, to Los Angeles where Leti builds a queer community that threatens to displace her relationship with Nana, her last living relative. As she reconfigures traditional family structures to accommodate her chosen *familia* of lesbian girlfriends K, Nol, and Edith, Leti struggles to honor to her Mexican-American heritage and biological kindred as well.

The novel begins when Leticia Marisol Estrella Torrez, queer Chicana protagonist and narrator as poetic and prolix as her name, arrives at a Fourth of July tea party and “trip[s] over a seam in the trailer’s chrome floor” (3). As her clumsy entrance portends, Leti is perpetually stumbling over the ideological “seam[s]” of American nationality and conventional gender, exposing a “trailer’s” constructedness and mobility in what appears to be the solid “chrome” of a fixed foundation. In keeping with the revolutionary implications of a tea party on the Fourth of July, Leti resists colonization by any single gender identity, transforming from vampire whiteface to shaved-head turbodoke to 1940s

housedress to black vinyl catsuit to barbershop boy in the space of a few chapters. Despite her dedication to a year-round Independence Day, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* does not pay homage to the traditional American narrative of national autogenesis that begins with the Boston Tea Party. Rather, a blend of ancient and contemporary borderland mythohistories arise from the southern Californian landscape as La Llorona “moan[s]” through “the Santa Ana desert winds,” revealing the immigrant America upon which nationalist American rhetoric is built (Lemus 11). Leti makes this immigrant mythohistory her own with the character of Weeping Woman, whose presence throughout the text prods Leti’s queer desire and transformations. While the legends of her own heritage empower Leti to invent beyond the binary of traditional gender imperatives, her indigenous roots also prove to have an inhibiting gravitational pull of their own. In order to grow as a queer Chicana, Leti must learn how to navigate between invention and convention without compromising either familial duty or personal desire.

This paper traces the development of Leti’s personal mythohistory from her great-grandmother’s bedtime stories of the Aztec deity Tlazolteotl to Leti’s own inventive blending of Tlazolteotl with contemporary Mexican-American bogeywoman La Llorona. From a palimpsest of ancient and current folklore, Leti builds her own patron goddess and invisible friend: Weeping Woman, a silent diva of sex and static, more electrical current than true character. She is the catalyst for Leti’s becoming, always stimulating a necessary change when Leti’s performance begins to resolve into identity. Despite Leti’s conviction that her Nana neither understands nor supports her queer lifestyle, Weeping Woman’s genesis in Nana’s La Llorona stories suggests that Leti’s gender invention actually relies on Nana for inspiration and authorization. Even though Weeping Woman’s

presence stimulates transformation in Leti's life, Leti's greatest metamorphosis occurs in the final pages when Weeping Woman abandons her after Nana's death, and she realizes that Nana has been behind Weeping Woman all along. In my reading, I argue that Leti must also learn how to transcend La Llorona's solitary mourning so that she can finally embrace the community of female power that is La Llorona's legacy.

I begin by exploring Leti's indigenous heritage with a queer reading of the Aztec goddess family that, I argue, anticipates and motivates contemporary formations of queer Mexican-American communities. The first section of my paper, "Tlazolteotl's Tea Party," offers an analysis of Tlazolteotl as a queer figure who is embedded in a network of interdependent Aztec goddesses who, in various ways, transcend the gender binary. This section also addresses the performative dimension of the Aztec codices in which these goddesses appear. By interpreting the codices as manuals for embodied ritual rather than static reflections of history, I will show how codex writing demanded community collaboration and embodied performance in much the same way as Leti's tea parties.

The second section, "La Llorona and La Malinche: 'Bad, Bad, Bad Girls,'" considers how Tlazolteotl's metamorphosis into La Llorona and La Malinche inspires and sanctions Leti's identification as a queer individual who resists maternity as the female standard. Nevertheless, this section also contends that Leti's revision of the legend succumbs to an equally inadequate standard; Weeping Woman may defy domestication in a liberating way, but her pernicious effect on Leti suggests that solitude, pain, and marginalized mourning are still the inevitable consequences of refusing to conform to patriarchal standards.

Finally, the third section, “Queer Kinship and Drag Royalty” argues that Leti’s entrenchment in her own Llorona myth ultimately inhibits the development of a queer community in collaboration with the community of her birth. While *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* leaves the tension between familial duty and personal desire unresolved, the constant narrative oscillation between past tea parties with Leti’s grandmothers and present tea parties with Leti’s chosen lesbian *familia* opens a space for new kinship structures to emerge, remapping the contours of the Mexican-American family and a woman’s role within it.

Tlazolteotl's Tea Party

Leti states her storytelling intentions up front: “I might as well tell you right now that this is really about my girl Weeping Woman, Nana, and me” (Lemus 3). Already, we know that *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* is a tale about women and the different shapes their relationships can take. From the raucous house parties where Leti gathers with her girls to the pink house on Walnut St. where Leti sips peppermint tea with Nana, the “tea party” is the sororal nexus where reconfigurations of the female role take place. Of course, Leti is not the stereotypical girl one might expect to catch at a tea party at all. She is a strong, independent, queer woman who is just as likely to don a tiara as she is a dildo (Lemus 144, 165). She actively chooses her own gender by the moment rather than passively paying homage to traditional “tea party” femininity. And yet, the “tea party” title is an apt metaphor for Leti’s world: an exclusively female sphere where the performance of gender eclipses biological sex, where ritual proprieties are rendered gaudy burlesques, and where mimetic learning devolves and develops into playful invention.

While tea parties do not traditionally explore alternatives to heteronormative femininity, they do expose the inherent contingency of the feminine paradigm. Here, young women take on the feminine as a role to be played, as a costume that can be picked up and discarded at will. They learn to take an active role in mimesis by experimenting with their own identities, using gender norms as malleable fodder for their own ludic desires. According to Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, this kind of playful inhabitation of a gender role is the only “possible or effective” way deconstruction can

occur: since “the movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside,” we must “inhabit” the structure “*in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it” (24, emphasis his). Through experimentation with male and female drag, Leti deconstructs gender “in a certain way”—not in pursuit of a way out of the structure (Derrida implies that there is no such place), but in order to understand the mechanism that makes the structure of gender work. As the title of the novel also suggests, the allegorical “tea party” allows Leti to “trace” her identity’s formative “elements” in multiple senses of the word: she “traces” a preexisting path backward in pursuit of the “trace” of ancestral gender norms, just as she “traces” the outlines of a new path toward unknown gender difference.

Although the tea party’s inherent performativity inspires Leti to invent her own mutable gender identity, it is the community of women who comprise the tea party—and the queer history that binds them together—that gives Leti the authority to do so. In the first of Leti’s flashbacks to childhood, she recalls how she and her great-grandmother Mama Estrella would sit on the back porch, sipping peppermint tea, while Mama would tell her “favorite bedtime tuck-in story” about “a girl with hair as blue as the sun is bright”—a girl who is clearly a proxy for Leti herself (33-34). The blueness of the girl’s hair gives her a queer aesthetic, suggesting that Mama Estrella already recognizes that Leti is “special,” and that her narrative will help prepare Leti for the backlash difference inevitably inspires (Lemus 33). Even as Mama Estrella warns Leti that the girl will be “teased for her beautiful sunshine,” she reveals that the girl’s strange appearance is actually a token of her exceptionality: as it turns out, she is “a goddess princess from ancient Aztec times reborn into a little girl body” (33). Although Mama Estrella and

Nana Lupe certainly adhere to familiar gender prescriptions like long hair and ladylike behavior, they also teach Leti to celebrate the feminine as a sacred and creative force, and to feel empowered, even regal, by this feminine birthright.

Drawing from Aztec goddess lore, Mama Estrella invents her own familial mythohistory by naming Leti the granddaughter of Aztec goddess Tlazolteotl, thus firmly rooting young Leti in a heritage of female strength, compassion, and self-pride that arises from her Aztec ancestry. Instead of condemning her to the tedium of tradition, Mama Estrella coopts indigenous mythology and grafts it onto Leti, showing Leti by example how to use history and community to transform identity. To make her point clear, Mama Estrella gives Leti her own etiology myth:

Your grandmother, Tlazolteotl, the one in charge of love, she cried when she saw you. Cried and cried, she's always making such a fuss, that one. But who could blame her? Your blue hair. So beautiful. She borrowed a few strands of your fine baby feather hair, and she wove a quilt above the earth with it to keep you warm in your cradle. Child, it is because of you that the sky is so blue. (34)

Mama Estrella's benediction accomplishes several things at once: she validates the girl's queerness as beauty, endows her with a caretaker who loves her unconditionally, and gives her a way to see herself as an integral part of the larger world. Moreover, this teatime tuck-in arms the girl with a divine distaff of women who "watch over" Leti and promise "to keep [her] warm" (34). Leti's biological and mythological female ancestors, from Mama Estrella to the goddess Tlazolteotl (who is, by genealogical implication, Nana Lupe), weave a horizon of beautiful possibility that originates in Leti herself (34).

On the other hand, Tlazolteotl's gift also lends Leti a dangerous amount of autonomy; the blue-hair blanket allows the girl to keep herself warm with her own bodily excess at the same time that it insulates her in *her own* world. In this alternative reading, the sky's color dims from the celestial blue of freedom to the solitary blue of sadness. As the novel goes on, it is unclear which reading Leti prefers. As if Mama Estrella's myth were more prophesy than bedtime story, the tension between sovereign freedom and sorrowful isolation remains unresolved throughout Leti's life. In her youth, "books and solitude were better friends than the kids at school" (35). This solitude soon transforms into sovereignty as Leti becomes the ruler of her own queer world. When Leti moves to Los Angeles and joins a queer community, her closest friends call her "princess" in honor of her aristocratic preferences. She craves a strand of "bright sprinkle diamonds about [her] neck" to corroborate her royal bearing, but since "diamonds couldn't be afforded," three wired rows of a pearl choker keep her "princess neck and long and [her] princess head held high" (34). It seems that Leti misunderstands the legend's larger theme of filial love and female solidarity. Her mythical heritage as an "Aztec princess" gives rise to the "drag princess" Leti later becomes, but Leti misrecognizes Mama Estrella's tale of a noble community as a tale of personal nobility (33, 170). When she reflects on her bedtime genesis, Leti concludes, "I was royalty *beyond* the stories Mama had tucked me in with" (34, emphasis mine). This insistence upon autonomy and aristocracy will ultimately prove too confining for comfort. In the end, Leti must exchange her crown for her kindred.

Despite Leti's haughty interpretation of her grandmothers' myths, their stories of the Aztec goddess family still provide a productive framework for Leti's development as

a queer Chicana. In both pre-conquest codices like the *Codex Borgia* and the *Codex Laud* and post-conquest codices like the *Codex Borbonicus* and the *Tonalamatl of Aubin*, fertility goddesses were often depicted as cross-dressers who existed in a liminal space between male and female, creation and destruction, the sacrificers and the sacrificed. The version of Tlazolteotl presented on page 43 of the *Codex Laud* wears a traditionally masculine loincloth draped over her skirts, signifying a hidden female phallus, even as the stereotypical accessories of the domestic female, a spindle and thread, decorate her hair (Fig. 1). On page 63 of the *Codex Borgia*, Tlazolteotl carries a shield and takes a captive by the hair (Fig. 2), while she delivers her own child on page 13 of the *Codex Borbonicus* (Fig. 3). Like Leti, who dabbles in the wardrobes and behaviors of masculinity, femininity, and everything in between, Tlazolteotl “play[s] with concepts of sexual excess and the human body while also asserting the coming together of genders” (Sigal 30). In both aesthetics and actions, Leti shares with Tlazolteotl a defiance of classification that can only be categorized as queer.



Figure 1: “Tlazolteotl in skirt and loincloth.” *Codex Laud*, 43. Photo by Author. Courtesy of The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of The General Libraries University of Texas at Austin.



Figure 2: “Tlazolteotl takes a captive.” *Codex Borgia*, 63. Photo by Author. Courtesy of The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of The General Libraries University of Texas at Austin.



Figure 3: “Tlazolteotl gives birth.” *Codex Borbonicus*, 13. Photo by Author. Courtesy of The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of The General Libraries University of Texas at Austin.



Figure 4: “Chalchiuhtlicue and Tlazolteotl release the flood.” *Tonalamatl of Aubin*, 5. Photo by Author. Courtesy of The Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of The General Libraries University of Texas at Austin.

Binary gender roles were a part of the sexual economy of daily life for Aztec people, who were bound to either the masculine or feminine sphere, but in Aztec cosmology, these complementary forces were often present simultaneously in a single deity. Because femininity was just as integral to fertility as it was to warfare (which the Aztecs believed also made the city-state fertile), fertility goddesses like Tlazolteotl, Cihuacoatl, Chalchiuhtlicue, and Coatlicue were both warriors and goddesses of childbirth (Sigal 19). Exceeding the bounds of a single gender role transgressed against the ethic of moderation and was considered a vice, but fertility goddesses like these were not subject to the common law, nor were they subject to traditional gender hierarchies that governed daily Aztec life at the time of the conquest (Sigal 13-14). It is no wonder that Leti identifies more with elite Aztec deities than the common people of her indigenous heritage.

By invoking the goddess Tlazolteotl, Mama Estrella introduces Leti to a figure who exceeds binary representations of male/female gender and virtuous/sinful sexuality. According to Pete Sigal, “Nahua thought at the time of the Spanish conquest envisioned sexual relations as elements of a larger set of ritual practices designed to promote fertility: of gods, humans, animals and the earth” (14). In Aztec society, sexual morality was fundamentally tied to the community and its relationship to the environment. Contrary to Christian ethics of sin and virtue (onto which Aztec ethics would later be mapped, unsuccessfully in some cases), Aztec morality was conceived in terms of excess and moderation. “Fertility” related to growth capacities of crops, livestock, and the human population—all of which had to be kept in check by an economy of moderation

(Sigal 14). Therefore, sexual behavior included both physical intimacies like intercourse and activities that did not involve erotic stimulation like “the ritual killing of humans and animals, burning of maize, incense and other qualities, letting of blood and sweeping houses, streets and other areas” (14). As we will see in my later analysis of La Llorona and Leti’s Weeping Woman, Aztec sexuality served a dual purpose: it destroyed life just as easily, and just as necessarily, as it created life.

Despite (or, perhaps, due to) Tlazolteotl’s gender ambiguity, she is traditionally “a highly sexual deity” (Sigal 23). According to Patricia Granziera and Joseph Kroger, she was “the embodiment of sexual excess and perversion” (53). And yet, when Mama Estrella calls Tlazolteotl “the one in charge of love,” she never suggests that that her love is of the illicit or perverse variety—at least not according to contemporary understandings of perversion (Lemus 34). Since Aztec ethics arise from a system of excess and moderation rather than sin and righteousness, Tlazolteotl’s perversity relates more to materially excessive than spiritually evil behavior. It comes as no surprise, then, that her name literally translates from the original Nahuatl as the god (teotl) of trash (tlazolli). As the divine representative of filth, she provoked excessive sexuality at the same time that she offered purification and absolution for lusty deeds. She was the confessor goddess, to whom all Aztec people admitted their guilt at least once in a lifetime, usually during old age (Granziera and Kroger 203). As the dark black or red stain around her mouth and chin suggests, Tlazolteotl would eat the dirt of their confessions, “absorb[ing] and transform[ing] filth into creative organic matter, just as the earth itself does” (Granziera and Kroger 203). Perhaps this is why, unlike other fertility goddesses who were patrons of midwives or pregnant women, Tlazolteotl was the patron of newborns (Granziera and

Kroger 205). Just as she transformed filth into fertile soil, she brought new life out of the old.

Despite the fact that she is the only deity in any codex who is depicted giving birth, Tlazolteotl's name is markedly genderless. While the original Nahuatl lacks gendered pronouns altogether (a significant enough fact in and of itself), a goddess' female sex could usually be determined by her nominative association with a skirt (Sigal 12). For example, Coatlicue means "lady of the serpent skirts," and Chalchiuhtlicue translates as "lady of the jade skirts." Tlazolteotl's nominative association with waste, however, eclipses her sexual orientation, suggesting that her most salient feature was her social function rather than her gender. Her ability to negotiate moral and material excess was far more important than her ability to negotiate a male/female binary. Much like Leti, who can't "wear a fixed category," what Tlazolteotl did trumped any attempt to define what she was (Lemus 170).

And yet, Mama Estrella's reading of the goddess of filth as the goddess of love implies that desire is inherently a state of excess that must be checked. Therefore Tlazolteotl cannot exist alone: she is commonly paired with Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of rivers, lakes, and oceans who purifies those who have transgressed (Sigal 23). On page 5 of the *Tonalamatl of Aubin*, Tlazolteotl's head emerges from Chalchiuhtlicue's groin like a phallus as a flood rages below them (Fig. 4). Both of their mouths are slightly open, indicating that they summon the floodwaters together, simultaneously. At the bottom of the image, two bodies submerged in the waves are either being sacrificed to the torrent of destruction or borne in its cleansing flow. The fate of the human figures is unclear—we are not certain whether they are perishing in the undertow or being cleansed by holy

water—but perhaps this equivocality is appropriate to a goddess pairing that arises from the tension between excess and moderation rather than suppressing one with the other. While both Tlazolteotl and Chalchiuhtlicue preside over childbirth, symbolizing “the use of dirt and water in the washing away of the trash of the newborn,” the flood demonstrates that they are also capable of great destruction (Sigal 22). Both abjection and ablution are necessary for creation, but even creation needs to be checked when it becomes excessive. Mama Estrella ties Tlazolteotl and the goddess family to Leti because she recognizes that creatures of excess—those like Leti who desire multiple roles and performances—must also be strong enough to endure attempts to re-assimilate them into economies of moderation.

Like the moon with which they are associated, the Aztec goddess family exerts a cyclic force on the tide of human population, waxing and waning between creation and destruction, growth and sacrifice (Granziera and Kroger 50). Together, these goddesses represent a harmony that defies autonomy and demands a collective, explicitly sororal, effort in order to sustain the cyclical movement of the Aztec community. Their kinship provides a model for Leti to imitate; they demonstrate that no goddess can exist in isolation without causing great destruction to the human community. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that none of these goddesses are merely benevolent caregivers. Fertility goddesses were greatly revered for their contribution to childbirth, but their worth was not limited to maternity. Unlike La Virgen, the Catholic incarnation of the Aztec mother goddess who protects her people and intercedes on their behalf, the darker faces of the goddess family also consumed the life they created.

In fact, according to the pre-conquest Aztec cosmology, fertility goddesses were the hungriest for human sacrifice. Cihuacoatl, goddess of midwives and patron of those who die in childbirth, helped create humans by grinding up the bones of the dead like corn kernels and mixing them with blood from Quetzalcoatl's penis (Granziera and Kroger 180). And yet, according to Domino Perez, Cihuacoatl demanded more sacrificial victims than any other goddess (*There Was a Woman* 136). Her roar was “an omen of war” that called men to battle, and they feared her as “a horror and a devourer” (*There Was a Woman* 136).

Mictlancihuatl, the “Lady Death” who waltzes in circles with Weeping Woman and La Virgen in *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, was also an insatiable deity who feasted on human flesh in the underworld (Lemus 130). In *Codex Fejervary Mayer*, by contrast, Mictlancihuatl “has full breasts and a belly with stretch marks” that suggest “she was a creative force that destroys only to create new life” (Granziera and Kroger 200). Like Cihuacoatl, she was a part of a larger cycle that promotes life by feeding on the dead.

Women who died in child labor, called the Cihuapipiltin (Noble Women), had a similarly predatorial dark side. In the afterlife, they were hailed as warriors and given the same respect as those who died in combat, but like a warrior, they no longer desired to bring forth life but to take it away. On five nights of the year, the Cihuapipiltin haunted crossroads and stole wayward children (Granziera and Kroger 179). Perez cites Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*, which notes that the Cihuapipiltin were also known to abduct babies from their cradles, leaving an obsidian blade in their place—a scenario that might remind readers of Leti's first girlfriend Rob, who hides a gutting knife beneath the

mattress (*There Was a Woman* 142; Lemus 48). In all of these cases, moderation checks proliferation; the threat of sacrifice checks sexual abandon.

More to the point of Lemus' text, where Leti focuses on self-transformation rather than procreation, the codices teach us that the Aztecs did not restrict the female body's ability to produce to childbirth. The *Codex Borbonicus*, for example, demonstrates that the goddess is also capable of re-creating herself (Fig. 3). In Trecena 13 of this early sixteenth-century Aztec calendar, Tlazolteotl squats in the traditional posture of an Aztec woman in labor.¹ Her skirt, headdress, and birthing mat are all decorated with crescent moons (or vulvas, depending on your perspective). Per usual, she wears a *pulque* nose ornament and an *ichcaxochitl* headdress of unspun cotton, both of which signify her association with the earth (Granziera and Kroger 203). Her harvest accessories and natal activity are consistent with her role as a fertility goddess, but upon closer inspection, it seems that Tlazolteotl's delivery is not as straightforward as it seems. A second skin hangs from her body like oversized clothing with limp gloves dangling from her fingers; a youth with wings floats above the scene; footsteps extend from the cherub to her headdress as if to indicate imminent impregnation—but the head that descends from her skirt is oddly that of an adult. To the right, a living serpent pairs with the skeleton of a snake in an uncanny embrace.

The most interesting details of this image, however, are the newborn's actual physical characteristics: the child on the birthing mat wears a headdress, necklace, and ear adornments identical to Tlazolteotl's—accessories of unspun cotton that are her unique trademark as “Lady Cotton” (Granziera and Kroger 178, 203). Granziera and

Kroger offer a likely reading: “She is shown giving birth to her own image, which holds an intertwined cord, symbolizing the continuation and renewal of life” (204). From this vantage point, it seems increasingly possible that Tlazolteotl is not wearing someone else’s skin, but like the serpent that appears once at her feet and twice to her right, she is shedding *her own* skin.² Regardless, it is clear from the entangled snakes that this is no inert portrayal of a stagnant deity. One snake is flesh and the other is bone, suggesting the dynamic cycle of incarnation and discarnation necessary to life. Together, the snakes mimic the glyph *ollin*, which means “movement”: indeed, Trecena 13 celebrates *ollin* as its theme (Novotny 33). *Ollin*, which symbolizes “the continuation and renewal of life,” is also present in the cord the infant holds, and in the juxtaposition of sacrificial imagery (a severed head) with the nativity scene (a new head just emerging). According Diane Taylor, the *ollin* “is the motor behind everything that happens in life, the repeated movement of the sun, stars, earth, and elements. *Olin*,³ also meaning ‘hule’ or rubber, was applied to sacrificial victims to ease the transition from the earthly realm to the divine” (14). This is a new kind of harmony that is not predicated on the stable maintenance of an immovable border like male/female and life/death, but on the perpetual waxing and waning of a continuous rebirth that defies borders altogether. The goal shifts from the transhistorical fixity of balance to cyclical change that meets a present need.

¹ Eloise Quinones Keber speculates that, since Trecena 13 celebrates the harvest, this image depicts the

² I am reminded by Michael Hironymous from UT Austin’s Benson Center for Latin American Studies that many *ixiptla*, or deity impersonators, wore the flayed epidermises of sacrificial victims during ritual reenactments. Nevertheless, Tlazolteotl dons sacrificial skin while giving birth, thus underscoring the generative potential of sacrifice. Even in (especially in) a folio crowded with the accouterment of ritual death—the skull on a spit, the severed head, the crosshatched spikes that appear at the bottom of the image and once again in the hands of the vulture to Tlazolteotl’s right—something new is brought into life.

For Granziera and Kroger, the winged child who floats just above and to the right of Tlazolteotl illustrates the Aztec belief that humans walked from the celestial realm “to the belly of the mother who would take them to this world” (205). However, if we read the child that Tlazolteotl delivers as her own image, then the movement from the celestial realm to the earthly one describes her own transformation and re-embodiment rather than the traditional scene of birth. This ritual of re-embodiment also describes the purpose of the Codex in its original Aztec context. As Diane Taylor notes, the kind of writing the Aztecs practiced prior to the Conquest was secondary to and dependent upon “embodied culture for transmission” (17). That is to say, the Codex is more of a manual than an artifact—a call to enactment rather than a time capsule for dead history. According to the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*,

The *tonalamatl* figures [almanac illustrations] were illustrated to provide models for people who wore deity costumes during ceremonies. A detailed version, like that of the *Codex Borbonicus*, for example, would have provided a pictorial record for the rituals to be performed as well as for the requisite deity impersonator costumes and accessory items. (136)

The images in the Codex are not the image of gods, but of people imitating gods—or better yet, people becoming gods. By following the instructions illustrated in this calendar-cum-manual, Aztec priests took on the characteristics of the deities they impersonated. As we shall see, replacing the gods with real people in a way that turns dead history into a dynamic, contemporary performance proves to be one of the most prominent themes of Lemus’ novel.

³ “*Olin*” and “*ollin*” are two spellings of the same word, and are used interchangeably by different scholars.

Aztec codices are blueprints for a monument that is built in the body, summoning not just the personal body, but the entire social body. Far from a confined act of autogenesis, Tlazolteotl's nativity scene is actually a script that compels a collective performance. Rather than reading Tlazolteotl as a static representation of a goddess giving birth, we must read her as the dynamic performance of a human community giving birth to itself. Although Tlazolteotl defies preservation by the archive, she transforms without entirely disappearing, calling her people to transform alongside her. Like Leti's Weeping Woman, Tlazolteotl is the inspiration behind transformation—the “static wind” that propels an embodied performance (Lemus 118). The cherub child whose footprints indicate movement through Tlazolteotl suggests that, like Weeping Woman, Tlazolteotl is less a true character than a conduit for change—the divine alembic through which the child must grow to become a woman, as Leti grows through Weeping.

La Llorona and La Malinche: “Bad, Bad, Bad Girls”

Given the goddesses’ power over mortal men, it comes as no surprise that later Spanish and North American patriarchies⁴ vilify the dark, untamable faces of the mother goddess by banishing them all to the social margins and reducing their complexity to a single, nameless identity in the myth of La Llorona. According to one of the many post-Colombian revisions of the Aztec goddess family, an indigenous Aztec woman is seduced by a Spaniard in grotesque parody of the Spanish seduction and rape of indigenous peoples. She bears him two children, but when he abandons her, she retaliates by drowning her children in the river, and then killing herself. When she confronts the Christian God with her sins, he sentences her to return to earth until she finds her lost children. Thus cursed to an eternity of fruitless searching, she haunts the riverside, wailing for her babies, drowning all wayward youths who come too close to those watery shadows. In one fell swoop, the Spanish retelling condenses Tlazolteotl’s sexual excess, Chalchiuhtlicue’s baptismal river, Cihuapiltin’s kidnapping, and Cihuacoatl’s moaning into a single, doleful ghost that her own people learn to fear (Perez, “La Llorona”).

Moreover, Christianization forced the multifaceted Aztec goddess family into an ill-fitting binary that pivoted on motherhood. Those who did not fit the Virgin Mary’s role as the good mother *par excellence* were lumped together and cast aside as the bad

⁴ Domino Perez points out that patriarchy was already established in the Aztec empire well before the Spanish conquest (*There Was a Woman* 139). She offers the myth of Huitzilopochtli, the war god who dismembered his sister Coyloxauhqui and replaced his mother Coatlicue as the primary deity, as evidence of a shift from matriarchy to patriarchy around the time of the Aztecs’ resettlement in Tenochtitlan. For Perez, vilification of mother goddesses who challenged male rule began with the Aztecs themselves.

mother. This dualistic model of female morality persists in Mexican-American literature still today. The work of Rudolfo Anaya, bestselling Mexican-American author and winner of the National Medal of Arts in 2001, is an exemplary proponent of this dualistic ideology. Many of his fictional female characters arise from the virgin/whore dichotomy, best illustrated by the spiritual battle that pits holy Última (a *curandera*) against Trementino's three evil daughters (*brujas*) in Anaya's *Bless Me Última*.

In his nonfictional treatise on Chicano machismo, "‘I’m the King’: The Macho Image," Anaya states his thoughts on the matter explicitly. While this essay endeavors to celebrate female power and thus restore balance to male/female relationships, it also clearly limits a woman's authority (and her very worth as a human being) to maternity. Anaya's charitable allotment of agency to mothers is always-already limited to the good of the patriarch: women are only powerful insofar as they rear their young men well and bolster the common "good" of a masculine society—that is to say, insofar as women ensure their own peaceful colonization. Anaya even goes so far as to declare "bad" males the direct result of poor mothering: "A mother who is active in shaping the maleness of her child will produce a more integrated man; if the mother is not there or if her behavior has been conditioned by an oppressive patriarchy, a more dysfunctional child will emerge" (68). While allotting agency to a traditionally disempowered position gestures toward feminism, it is important to note that such a claim comes dangerously close to blaming women for their own violent subjugation. Although Anaya tries to empower La Llorona in *Bless Me, Última* by casting her as a symbol of balance, her power remains merely symbolic. As "the presence of the river," La Llorona maintains her marginal status as a specter that lacks a legible voice or even a legible humanity (Anaya 26).

Even Alma Luz Villanueva's collection *Weeping Woman: La Llorona and Other Stories*, a feminist recuperation project that attempts to restore La Llorona's reputation by aligning her with Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of cleansing, resorts to a version of the goddess rooted in purity and altruism. While Villanueva's La Llorona is no docile friend of patriarchy, she intercedes on behalf of oppressed women in much the same way as La Virgen. Again, reducing the divine woman's role to that of protectress risks reducing her to a maternal standard, leaving no room for a goddess whose role exceeds that of a caregiver.

Leti, however, exchanges the maternal benefactor for the anti-maternal dominatrix, returning the femme fatale to a place of power as her own personal goddess, Weeping Woman. Rather than liberating Leti from oppression as Villanueva's Llorona might, Weeping *is* Leti's oppressor. In fact, as Perez points out, Leti's version of Weeping Woman is not so different from the usual folktales that feature her as a villain: she "flies, wanders, threatens, cajoles, weeps, and eventually abandons the protagonist" (*There Was a Woman* 28). However, instead of policing female sexuality and reinforcing heterosexuality as La Llorona tales are wont to do, Leti's Weeping Woman *provokes* prohibited sexuality in much the same way as Tlazolteotl. Whenever Leti sees a particularly attractive male-to-female transsexual at Crystal's bar, Weeping "[blows her] a sudden gust of hot air and the little hairs on the back of [her] neck [stand] to attention" (Lemus13). She fills Leti "with anticipation that was almost overwhelming" and brings on "nervous-girl-in-waiting nosebleeds" throughout the novel (Lemus 56). In some instances, even Leti's girlfriends seem to be possessed by her: when Leti lies in bed with K, Weeping Woman kisses her "slow and steady and all of a sudden," her "metal whisper

[echoing] in the layered shadows of the room” (Lemus 119). Despite her erotic stimulation, Weeping Woman is not reducible to sexual drive; she also compels self-destructive behavior: “Weeping clamped my neck in her teeth and told me to draw a drop of my own blood” (14). Later, Leti literalizes Weeping’s needling claims on her body when she gets a tattoo of Weeping Woman from a girlfriend in college. Even the wreath of cadmium carnations that encircles Weeping’s tattooed crown is “barbed” (Lemus 30). Like Cihuacoatl, “the savage serpent woman” whose roar called men to war just as easily as it called them to work the fields, Weeping is a force that moves Leti and demands her obedience, whether or not obedience is in Leti’s best interest (Sigal 12).

While Leti alters the Llorona myth to accommodate lesbian desire, it is also very important to note that Leti’s retelling amplifies Weeping Woman’s traditional associations with the betrayal of family. In Leti’s version of the legend, the Spaniard does not abandon the Indian woman, and the woman does not weep because she lost her children: “She cried because she had a mixed baby, one her Indian family and neighborhood despised” (19). Rather than mourning her daughter’s loss, Weeping Woman mourns the loss of her daughter’s indigeneity. It is the fact that her daughter is half-Spanish that drives Weeping Woman to do her awful deed: “That is why she threw the little girl into the river that storming night, the night when the lightning’s gleam on her baby’s hazel eyes finally drover her mad. The Weeping Woman, she cried because she was la Malinche reborn” (Lemus 19). Hazel eyes, somewhere between the dark brown common to indigenous Mexicans and the lighter irises of Spanish descent, signify a fusion of colonizer and colonized that, according to Leti’s story, Indians “despised.”

This illicit cultural interface is emblematic of yet another “despised” mythohistorical character: La Malinche, the woman who betrayed her people “because she loved a conquistador” (19). According to Perez, La Malinche was an indigenous woman whose name has become “synonymous” with betrayal because she was Cortéz’s translator, tactical advisor, and lover (*There Was a Woman* 30). La Malinche’s legend has become entangled with that of La Llorona because she, too, allegedly murdered her children when Cortéz threatened to take them with him to Spain (*There Was a Woman* 31). Leti even writes herself into the myth as La Malinche, mentioning the “hazel gold glimmer” of her own eyes just a few paragraphs before she notes that the child Weeping throws into the river is hazel-eyed as well (Lemus 19). She identifies with Weeping Woman and La Malinche because their crimes are similar to her own: Leti also transgresses against the maternal imperative and attempts to “outrun” the community of her birth (Lemus 9).

But the community of her birth, her own maternal caretakers Nana and Mama Estrella, will not be left behind. Although Leti’s Anglicization of La Llorona’s title suggests yet another attempt to break with her indigenous roots, it becomes clear that Leti’s Weeping Woman is a direct descendant of Nana’s La Llorona tales and Mama Estrella’s bedtime stories of the indigenous goddess family. When Leti mentions that “[t]wenty-some odd years [have] passed since Nana first introduced me to my old lady Weeping,” she reminds us Nana gives her the story of Weeping Woman in the first place. The link between Tlazolteotl of Mama Estrella’s bedtime stories and Weeping Woman is also undeniable. According to Mama Estrella, Tlazolteotl was always inexplicably weeping: “Cried and cried, she’s always making such a fuss, that one” (Lemus 34).

Indeed, according to pre-Colombian legend, many of La Llorona's divine progenitors were known to weep and wail through the streets at night, warning the Aztec people that a social change—war, famine, even Spanish colonization—was to about take place (Perez, *There Was a Woman* 16-17).

In keeping with tradition, when Leti senses Weeping's presence, her ears begin to hum "a high-pitched moan" (Lemus 11). However, Leti takes this ancestral myth and reconfigures it ever further, transforming the maternal Tlazolteotl who weeps over the beauty of her grandchild in Mama Estrella's bedtime story into a figure of pure rebellion, a "bad girl" (literally, according to Anaya's standards) who actually glories in failed motherhood (Lemus 19). Rather than attempting to restore La Llorona's reputation, Leti associates her with La Malinche and embraces them both as "the archetype of the Wrong Kind of Woman," lauding their "fierce rebel lasting power" and proclaiming them "everything [she] wanted to be" (Lemus 19).

By celebrating their rebellion, Leti offers us a new perspective on the Llorona myth that rejects traditional narratives of maternity wherein a woman's primary task is to ensure the safety of her child. Weeping Woman is no passive victim of patriarchal abuse who tries to protect her offspring from the same, but an active agent of transformation who thrusts her offspring into that dangerous, fluid world at the margins of the patriarchal structure where they must learn to navigate their own identities in order to rise again. Rather than lamenting the death of the child at La Llorona's hands, Leti's self-alignment with La Llorona's hazel-eyed child suggests that the child does not die at all. Rather, drowning becomes a metaphor for baptism that Gloria Anzaldúa discusses at length in her groundbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera*. For Anzaldúa, La Llorona's

children do not perish in the river, but are transformed by it instead. She calls this transformative submersion “the Coatlicue state”: a descent into the chthonic underworld or “cavernous womb” of the cosmic Serpent for whom the goddess Coatlicue is named. Here, Coatlicue becomes a gateway to an immanent plane where all things become possible: “Simultaneously, depending on the person, [Coatlicue] represents: duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective—something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (Anzaldúa 46). Leti’s retelling of La Llorona translates her ostensible crime, the drowning of her children, as a return to the primordial womb where contradictions coexist in a third space that is something other than simple conflation. However, unlike traditional Christian baptisms in which the neophyte is spiritually reborn in a single submersion, Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue state is a baptism wherein one is continuously born again—wherein the self has no stable identity but remains a constant state of transformation. Keeping Anzaldúa’s redemptive translation of La Llorona in mind, it is possible to read Weeping Woman’s anti-maternal relationship with Leti as a positive one. Rather than sacrificing Leti in order to exact revenge on the patriarch who left her (or to obey the command of the patriarch that punished her), Weeping Woman’s frequent assaults on Leti’s body immerse her in the fluid plane of illicit desire and gender invention *despite* their prohibition by patriarchy.

When Weeping appears, she catalyzes what John Muckelbauer would call a “singular rhythm”: she provides Leti with a “moment of insight” that is “not subject to the logic of identity,” but to the illogic of creation (34). In *The Future of Invention*, Muckelbauer’s “singular rhythm” is very similar to Derrida’s call to “inhabit” the structure “*in a certain way*” (24). As the “singular rhythm” incarnate, Weeping Woman

refuses signification and prompts “affirmative invention”; she is the “circuit-breaker” that “eludes control” and keeps Leti from settling into identity (Muckelbauer 34). Indeed, a sharp static always signals her presence, as if she represents a current of energy that jolts Leti into movement. She ensures that Leti’s performance of gender is, as the title emphasizes, “random.” Weeping’s electric charge propels Leti away from the either/or of identity and toward both/and of invention—to the between state where she must once again reorient herself in the hinterland beyond boy and girl, Aztec goddess and Mexican-American citizen.

Queer Kinship and Drag Royalty

Even though Weeping's "singular rhythm" is a movement away from structural oppression, Deleuze and Guattari remind us that the line of flight away from the structure is fated to fail. As Deleuze might say, Weeping Woman is Leti "becoming-animal," and so she "effectively shows a way out, traces a line of escape, but is incapable of following it or making it [her] own" (100). To permanently avoid the constraints of identification, Leti would have to disappear altogether. Deleuzian de-territorialization (becoming something else) always implies a re-territorialization (being something at all), and despite the liberatory potential of becoming-animal, she is bound to return to the territorial "impasse" of identity (Deleuze and Guattari 98). The subject dissolves, only to resolve again. This is why, throughout the novel, Leti oscillates between the mad freedom of becoming and the re-territorializing return to the laws of subjectivity—the same laws that govern family structure and compel Leti to honor her Mexican heritage.

But the disarticulation of identity that "becoming-animal" describes is not what makes Leti queer. In Deleuzian terms, we are *all* becoming-animal in the sense that we are all bodies in motion—sites of continuous de- and re-formation that challenge the continuity and autonomy of the Enlightenment subject. The nomadic mode of existence that mobilizes all identity formation has interesting implications for gender identity as well. As Judith Butler points out in her influential work *Gender Trouble*, there is no essential gender: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (187). All performances of gender, no matter how heteronormative, are drag performances. Gender identities are always under

construction; parodies of gender like drag performances (and like tea parties, I would add) merely expose gender's "contingency" on aesthetic performances and social practices. Or, to return to Derrida, "one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it" (24). What makes Leti queer is that she actively takes up her performance as drag, inhabiting it in a critical way. As Derrida reminds us, there are "certain" ways to inhabit the structure that subvert the tyranny of the Same with difference (24).

At this point, we must distinguish between inhabiting a gender and inhabiting a gender deconstructively so we can better understand the difference between "appropriative repetition" and "affirmative invention," respectively (Muckelbauer 32, 38). The contrast between K and Leti is particularly instructive to this end. While Leti dramatically fluctuates between multiple genders, constantly demanding that we read her in a new light, K embodies masculinity on a predictable continuum that never fluctuates into femininity nor becomes unrecognizable. As Leti puts it, "K had always been able to pass as dude if she wanted to" (Lemus 167). Leti's gender is perpetually ambiguous; K's "tough boy cliché" is virtually indistinguishable from maleness (Lemus 69). K is so passable that even their heterosexual neighbor develops a crush on her, thinking she is biologically male (Lemus 164). When K leaves Leti for Edith, a stripper who flaunts her girlishness in vinyl go-go boots and false eyelashes, K makes a choice with certain implications: she rejects Leti's performance of gender in favor of a woman who, like her, embodies a legible gender. By turning to Edith, K returns to the standard, heteronormative pairing.

These are two fundamentally different approaches to queerness. Both defy essentialist imperatives, but K's embodiment of masculinity requires no interpretive act.

Leti repeats masculinity as well, identifying as “at least part boy. A femme boy deep down,” but as Muckelbauer clarifies, “everything hinges on *how* one repeats (rather than *if* one repeats)” (Lemus 170; Muckelbauer 13, emphasis his). Leti is less concerned with “signifying content,” or being passable as a male, than she is with navigating desires that defy passability (Muckelbauer 18). This is why Leti never directly discusses her motives to cross-dress, treats her style as a political imperative, or suffers any sense of loyalty to a particular stylistic image. Her performance does not signify a content, so she is “not primarily concerned with understanding or *even with the effort to prevent misunderstanding*” (Muckelbauer 18, emphasis his). Leti does not identify as singularly boy or girl, so her aesthetic does not attempt to clarify her gender identity.⁵ She discloses that homophobes are not the only ones who take offense to her both/and approach to the either/or gender binary; Leti says that even “pre-Stonewall dykes [want] to call [her] on her game” (Lemus 170). She prides herself as a princess, but for Leti, this is no obstacle to being a “bookworm queer boy at heart” (Lemus 170). “What kind of dyke was I anyway?” she asks; “Good question,” she replies (Lemus 170).

Were Leti to exchange her vagabond queerness for K’s habitual cross-dressing, were she to become “subject to a logic of identity” with “a signifying content,” her performance of deconstruction would necessarily become an “appropriative repetition”—an uncritical reiteration of the hegemony of the Same (Muckelbauer 32). This is precisely what Nana rejects when she takes one look at Leti’s uncharacteristic attempt at

⁵ As Lisa Justine Hernandez puts it in her review of the novel, Lemus does not “interrogate Leticia’s unapologetic duality as both princess and boy dyke. Instead [Lemus presents Leti’s queer identity] without pretense, gently reminding readers that the physical gender markers cannot be equated with gender self-identification” (134).

male drag on Mother's Day and pronounces her disapproval, "Dear Mother of God. Is that a boy or a girl?" (Lemus 167). The maternal holiday and Nana's invocation of the "Mother of God" are no accident; she appeals to the sacred feminine as a talisman against the patriarchal impersonator she sees before her. Moreover, the question "Is that a boy or a girl?" underscores the fact that Leti has returned to a binary system of gender and no longer inhabits the space between in a deconstructive way. Until this point, Nana has implicitly acknowledged, accepted, and, through bedtime stories of the queer Aztec goddess family, authorized Leti's queerness. Nana even removes the cardigans Leti wears to conceal tattoos she thinks Nana might find offensive, gently reminding Leti that she does not have to hide. Far from insulting Leti's queer aesthetic, which she has never done before, Nana's critique erupts when Leti veers from the illegibly queer in favor of the male standard.⁶ For Nana, the only problem with Leti's lesbianism is that it excludes her.

While Leti believes that Nana rejects her extended lesbian family, saying that "it hurt to remember that Nana believed true family was the one we are born into, period," there is no evidence of Nana's bias in the text—at least not to this extreme (Lemus 176). Nana Lupe actually *embraces* K as family, calling she and Leti "my two girls" (Lemus 162). Nana attempts to welcome them both into her world, implicitly endorsing Leti's relationship with K after she speaks with K on the phone and pronounces her a "nice" girl whose "family taught her right"; she even tells Leti she is glad Leti met "a

⁶ For an interesting counterpoint to this critique, see the essay "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum," where Jack Halberstam critiques queer theory's preoccupation with gender fluidity. She argues instead that desire, gender, and sexuality "tend to be remarkably rigid" (290). Despite her distrust of the concept of fluidity, Halberstam maintains that "many (if not most or even all)

special friend” (97). But when Leti comes to greet Nana on the porch in “a blue tie,” “clean-cut boy haircut,” and “the same kind of forest-scented pomade Papa had used,” Nana stares at her, “smile gone, mouth agape, maybe disgusted, definitely bothered” (Lemus 167). Leti complains that “I smiled, but...she didn’t see me” (Lemus 166), as if Nana fails to recognize that this newly pressed costume represents her true character. But it is not Leti that Nana rejects. On the contrary, Leti momentarily succumbs to a logic of identity that obscures her creativity, arresting her flight, and it is this appropriative gesture that Nana cannot support (33). It seems that Nana not only accepts Leti’s queerness, but is capable of a more nuanced reading of queerness than Leti herself. When Leti cross-dresses as a male, Nana recognizes that this performance rings false because it returns to a binary; it simply inverts it while upholding a masculine referent.⁷

Leti never consciously registers Nana’s critique of the patriarchal imperative on the page, but she does seem to intuit Nana’s intent. Immediately following Nana’s rebuff, she celebrates her nomad ineffability, comparing her cross-dressing to a literal, endless border crossing: “my life depended on me crossing the street diagonally, sometimes in a winding circular pattern for that matter” (Lemus 169). She channels the serpentine movement of Coatlicue and Cihuacoatl, weaving between the binary like a

sexual and gender identities involve some degree of movement (not free-flowing but very scripted) between bodies, desires, transgressions, and conformities” (290).

⁷ Again, Halberstam provides an important and imperative counterpoint by arguing that masculine aesthetics do not reproduce *de facto* patriarchal imperatives. And yet, she also acknowledges that some “scripted” movements between identity and desire are more patriarchal than others: “not all models of masculinity are equal...it is crucial that we also pay careful attention to the functions of homophobia and sexism in particular within the new masculinities” (306). In keeping with John Muckelbauer’s *The Future of Invention*, the focus shifts from identity to performance; the question is not *if* one inhabits masculinity, but *how* one inhabits masculinity. As Leti herself puts it, “Never, I promised myself one line I wouldn’t cross, never would I be the mean kind of boy that laughed me back inside the store’s red doors” (Lemus 170). Leti may identify as “part boy,” but she will never identify as a patriarch.

snake that is never in the same place at once, even when it is lying still. While the metaphor of crossing a street plays directly on the literal border-crossings of other Mexican-Americans like the “*solteros*” on Walnut St., Leti’s “diagonal crossing” does not simply exchange one side of the border for the other (Lemus 25). Like many immigrant farm hands, she is migratory, and as Muckelbauer so eloquently explains, “itinerant travel is the affirmative rhythm of becoming itself” (Muckelbauer 97-98). Leti dances circles on the boundary in spite of it, refusing to be pigeonholed on one side or the other by binary logic: “Simple and complicated all at once, I wasn’t a pigeon to be tucked away neatly into a hole. I didn’t wear a fixed category without feeling pain. I was more, or less, or something different entirely” (Lemus 170). This image of the pigeon that refuses to be “tucked away” or “fixed” to a discrete gender identity soon emerges as Leti’s own mascot of difference, the totem of “becoming itself.”

After seeing K and Edith together in “Boy Town,” a place where homosexuality is no guardrail against patriarchal hierarchies that exclude the feminine and the illegibly queer, Leti returns home with Nol for a somber “slumber party” where she succumbs to depression over the loss of her lover to her best friend (Lemus 241-44). Suddenly, in the marginal state between “fall[ing] asleep” and “just waking up,” the image of a pigeon comes to her by a “shiver zap” of poiesis, postponing her melancholy with a craving for storytelling (Lemus 244-45). She bolts upright to tell Nol the tale of “the pigeons that stole diamonds” (Lemus 246), a story inherited from her great-grandmother over mugs of orange blossom tea. Once again, the line between convention and invention begins to blur as the voice of the storyteller wavers between Mama Estrella who “once...told me about this small pueblo,” Nana who “tells [Leti] to hush and just listen,” and Leti herself

who tells the story in the textual present, establishing a genealogy of female storytellers who all contribute to an ever-developing mythohistory (Lemus 246-47).

In this multi-vocal telling, Leti's ancestral village becomes its own bejeweled tea party where plain pigeons who "weren't anything fancy in their feathers" would perform an opulence that seems contrary to their natures, contrary even to the laws of gravity: "they would come flying into the pueblo and, whoosh, dip their beaks into rough piles of mined rock, swallow sparkling diamond pebbles whole, and fly away proud" (Lemus 246-47). In film school, Leti also craves diamonds, but they "couldn't be afforded," so she settles for Rob's false pearls (Lemus 34). Like the pigeons, she isn't "fancy in [her] feathers," but at this early point in the novel, Leti has yet to fully understand that the economics of gender exchange are based on patriarchal currency. As the novel progresses, however, Leti becomes increasingly confident in her right to the kind of power diamonds signify: in her exception to the rule of subjugation. The birds do not "steal" the diamonds in order to use them in any conventional, commercial way, and Leti does not steal emblems of masculinity in order to commandeer the patriarch's position. Rather, she takes masculinity and reconfigures it into new shapes that are neither "boy" nor "girl," but fiercely, ludically, Leti. In doing so, she mocks hegemony as the pigeons mock the field boss by filching his diamonds, rendering the patriarch's ostensible power a state of play, up for grabs.

In much the same way that the pigeons defy logic and gravity by filling their bellies with diamonds, Leti defies ideological and bodily constraints by laying claim to genders the binary forbids. Nana endorses this defiance when she defends the birds' right to the stones, even though the title of the story, "the pigeons that stole the diamonds,"

suggests a breach of social contract. Nana insists, “The diamonds those birds were taking weren’t even stolen. They knew nothing in the world was too great to be theirs. They knew they wanted that mined glisten glow. No matter what, those pigeons, they claimed their diamond birthright” (Lemus 247). Just as the scandalous name of the parable belies its justified content, all attempts to name Leti—to force her to make singular sense in a binary world that she deems unjust—ultimately fail. Even though Leti’s diagonal meandering amongst multiple genders “might not have been what some thought was proper” (Lemus 247), Nana makes it clear that Leti isn’t stealing a privilege that does not belong to her. On the contrary, Leti reclaims her “birthright” to self-determination when she acknowledges that “nothing in the world,” from her gender performance to her entrepreneurial dream of owning a grocery store, are “too great” to be hers.

The story of the pigeons connects the present tea party with Nol to the memory of a tea party long-passed when Nana first gave Leti the story to tell. Despite their quarrel just prior to Nana’s death, the transhistorical dimension of storytelling reconciles Leti with Nana, comforting Leti with the knowledge of her grandmother’s approval. Through the ritual of storytelling, Leti’s storytelling disjoins time, liberating shared experience from simultaneity by allowing past scenarios to collide with the present. In *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, performative time interrupts linear, historical time, making space for what Elizabeth Freeman calls an “ethics of responsibility to the other across time—toward the dead or toward that which was impossible in a given historical moment” (Freeman 9). Although Nana’s death already consigns her to the past, Leti’s storytelling allows Nana to speak through her from beyond the grave, making their reconciliation—“that which was impossible” when Nana was alive—possible. Freeman

confesses that these “reparations” are “imperfect and incomplete” (9), but like “the pigeons who stole the diamonds,” Leti steals Nana’s stories (or perhaps it is better to say that she accepts them as her “birthright”), and they give her the encouragement she needs to “fly away proud” (Lemus 246).

Nevertheless, it is impossible to overlook the fact that Leti’s metaphorical “fly[ing] away,” her de-territorialization into the genderless horizon, makes her increasingly susceptible to violence and isolation. Like the field boss who carves open the pigeon that has stolen his jewels, those who believe Leti does not have the right to don the signifiers of their gender (or, conversely, to refuse to signify a gender at all) cut Leti daily with their judgment and contempt. The word-bubbles above their furrowed brows call her, in no uncertain terms, “you genderless freak cake vampire” (Lemus 175). Living in the middle space, in a state of constant oscillation and resistance, is not always (if ever) as fancy-free as a tea party might sound. In keeping with the image of a single little girl surrounded by stuffed animals poised to sip their plastic teacups, the sole human at her own imaginary party, Leti is often excluded from the company of others. As a result of her gender ambiguity, she is ostracized from her gossiping neighbors, from K and Edith’s love affair, and even from the hippest nightclubs in Boy Town. Heteronormativity is not the only problem, and queer communities are not the only solution.

Far from a utopic solution to hegemony, queerness proves susceptible to the same divisive hierarchies of power that characterize heteronormativity. Lesbians mock Leti, calling her “a ki-ki, a neither-nor....One night she’s a femme prowling pretty for a butch, next night she’s a tom cruising for a lady” (169). Her refusal to embody a single gender

with any consistency frustrates homophobes and homosexuals alike. Bakers and grocers, the people Leti aspires to be, invalidate her not only as a patron, but also as a person. She is what Carl Kalwaitis would call a paradox, or a “crisis such that one cannot proceed in the ordinary, familiar way” (qtd. in Muckelbauer 159). She brings people to a limit in their own binary logic where they are forced to face both the fallibility of that logic and their own place within a fallible system. They do not thank her for this. By the novel’s closing pages, Leti is left alone with only the loyal Nol for company—and even Nol has to cajole her way into the fortress of Leti’s solitude (Lemus 240).

Leti’s loneliness lends a certain symmetry to the narrative arc: just as Leti rejects the company of her peers during her youth at the novel’s opening, her peers reject Leti’s company at the novel’s end—and once again, Leti barricades herself in her own blue-haired world. Rather than self-creation, however, this extreme seclusion achieves only self-consumption. When she isolates herself in her living room after Nana’s death, she becomes self-destructive as her bad habit of scab-eating and nail-biting takes a turn for the auto-cannibalistic: “Bite the hands that feed you. Nibble at skin toughened at nails’ borders....Eat. Own. Flesh. Consuming. Angry. Blood. Each finger torn. A complete set. Set. Complete. Alone” (Lemus 226). To be “complete” and “alone” is to assume the false autonomy of the Enlightenment subject—a fallacy that ultimately proves to inhibit Leti’s healing. Leti may invert the “I’m the King” of Anaya’s masculinity with her own “drag-princess” version of royalty, but this trope of nobility proves just as confining for queers as it is for patriarchs (Lemus 144).

This is surely the reason Nana cautions Leti, “don’t you forget your family. You only get one family (97). In her rush to discover herself, Leti too often deprives herself

of her greatest resource in the battle against heteronormative colonization: the female community of her birth, her ultimate “birthright” (Lemus 247). As Muckelbauer cautions postmodernism, “In order to effect actual change (whether rhetorically, socially, artistically, etc.), the future cannot just refuse the past. An outright break with tradition ‘risks incomprehensibility if not incoherence’ and, as such cannot alter tradition at all” (Muckelbauer 146). When Leti refuses to allow her past on Walnut St. to be complicit with her future in Los Angeles, she cuts herself off from the creative wellspring of her cultural roots and inhibits transformation. She sacrifices her biological family for her chosen family, and when her chosen family K and Edith desert her, she finds herself suddenly, miserably alone. Even Weeping Woman abandons her after Nana’s death.

But perhaps Weeping Woman's disappearance is precisely the point. The tendency to privilege pre-Colombian deities over contemporary Mexican-American women obscures the daily struggles of people in the material present under a veil of sepia-toned history. Romanticizing the goddesses of folklore, even goddesses like Tlazolteotl, Cihuacoatl, and Cihuapiltin who revel in queerness, risks prioritizing the esoteric “female within” over the real female without—women who are literally impoverished by a mythohistorical tradition that conceals their materiality as physical beings with bodies and desires of their own, who do not merely pander to those of others (Anaya 73). This is why Mama Estrella, Nana, and (finally) Leti must replace mythohistory with their own family history. “No matter how perfect powerful they thought they were,” asserts Leti, “I wasn’t going to let them ladies [the Virgen, Weeping Woman, and their cousin Lady Death] play me like a fool” (130). Even as she lights a candle to the Virgen, she prays for all three goddesses “to keep far away”—and it is only at this moment that she is finally able to confront the photograph of

her dead mother, whose absence haunts the novel (Lemus 130). When the mythology recedes, it opens a space for history to unfurl; at long last, Leti tells the reader the story she could never tell K—the tragic tale of her parents’ death in a car accident that she survived in utero. And yet, as the candlelight prayer to the Virgen suggests, spiritual mythohistory underwrites and enables the telling of her own family history.

As the only confessor goddess in the Nahua cosmology, Tlazolteotl promotes the same personal narration. According to Amos Megged, “The Nahua goddess Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina, who was said to be a tlazotlacuani, an eater of polluted substances, though associated in Nahua cosmology with carnal acts of impurity, was also in charge of forgiving these sins” (Megged 125). She may inspire people to engage in sexually transgressive behavior, but she demands their confession afterward. That is to say, Tlazolteotl instigates storytelling (especially the more interesting, naughty kind). She even feeds upon the tale. Since the Nahua saw sin in terms of material excess, it only makes sense that sinful behavior was represented as literal dirt—material impurities which the goddess Tlazolteotl would eat upon the sinner’s confession. As a result, she is known for the dark (usually red) dirt around her mouth (Megged 125). She consumes the excess of immorality, healing the sinner by transforming the sin into her own nourishment. Storytelling functions in much the same way for Leti, healing her quarrel with Nana and transforming her destructive self-consumption into constructive community-building. It comes as no surprise that, at the end of the pigeon tale when the man slices the bird’s belly open in search of the diamonds, he finds that the bird’s blood has transformed them into dirt: “The bird’s blood covered the great piles of diamonds and melted them all red clay mud” (Lemus 247). The diamonds that once signified Leti’s

desire for exceptionality have given way to the “red clay mud” of a story that encircles Tlazolteotl’s mouth—a story that brings Leti closer to those who told the story before her.

Without losing sight of her cultural heritage, Leti must exchange the gods for real people. In the final “tea party” parable of the pigeons, Leti removes Weeping’s mythical mask and exposes the real faces of the women beneath: Nana Lupe and Leti herself. The same “shiver zap” of static that usually heralds Weeping’s presence wakes Leti, urging her to speak: “the static crackle jangle of my voice hummed warm reliable, and Nana, she began walking deliberate and measured through the pink house backyard” (Lemus 245). “Static,” the electrical signifier of Weeping’s entrance, becomes a new kind of static here: an allegory for communication, an empty airwave that beckons for a speaker. It seems that “static” weeping has a dynamic function: it has a story to tell that bears the “trace” of bygone voices even as it transforms over time to suit the needs and desires of its current teller. Nana’s *cuentitos* and Leti’s revision of them channel La Llorona’s weeping into speech.

Finally, we realize that Nana has been at the heart of Weeping Woman all along. When Leti praises Nana in these penultimate pages, she does so with language identical to her earlier encomium of Weeping, calling Nana “[t]he woman who shows me how to be strong... [t]he woman I have admired and feared and adored all my life” (Lemus 246). In much the same way that La Llorona shadows La Virgen de Guadalupe as the darker face of a multifaceted goddess, Weeping shadows Nana as her “monstrous double,” the surrogate confidante for all the sexual frustrations and fears Leti thought Nana too saintly to handle. (By this point, we need not wonder why Nana’s real name is Guadalupe, nor

why all the photo albums that document Leti's childhood with Nana are covered in the same blue satin fabric as La Virgen's robes [Lemus 211, 130].) At the novel's conclusion, Leti finally acknowledges that, behind all her longing for ideal female companionship, there has always been Nana.

With Weeping's electric voice, Leti shows that La Llorona's moaning and Cihuacoatl's battle cry have never been "a pointless screaming that led nowhere" like trying in vain to talk over the din at Crystal's bar (Lemus 12). Far from meaningless white noise, weeping is a form of communication that insists on being heard. However, like static itself, this *form* of communication lacks *content* without an individual tongue to give it shape. In order to suspend the myth of solitude that Weeping Woman represents, Leti must articulate her mourning—and the centuries of anger, sorrow, subjection, and loss that have accumulated within it—in the material, personal present. As Leti herself affirms, "My body entire, my voice, me...you are not going to silence me. No, mujer, not you, not nobody, you are not taking my voice from me" (Lemus 208). In taking up the story that she inherited from Mama Estrella and Nana, Leti finally lends her own voice to the specter whose silence has haunted her for so long, and the static pull of this repetition resurrects the voices that came before her. As Leti loses herself to storytelling, Nana's footsteps echo behind the narrative as "deliberate and measured" as they were in life. Instead of asserting the sovereignty of a single voice (as Leti's breathless narration has accomplished so many times before), this kind of storytelling is more like listening. She recalls her Nana's gentle reproach, "You've done enough work for now, Leticia"—and even as Leti speaks, she begins to hear (245). Leti finally

removes the tiara of autonomy and aristocracy, and humbly receives the voices of the dead.

This final merging of tea parties exposes the fallacy of autonomy, revealing the community of women—Nana Lupe and Mama Estrella specifically—who have given rise to Leti’s unique voice. At this point, it becomes clear that Weeping Woman is no longer present because Leti no longer needs her. The myth of La Llorona—the woman who is left to herself, haunting the margins with her tears—merely perpetuates the patriarchal narrative from which she arises, consigning women to a story that is already over, an existence that is already defeated and pushed aside. If Leti is to truly transform, she must reject La Llorona’s nominative fate as the woman who always weeps. Instead, she must recognize the community of women from whom La Llorona descends.

Even Tlazolteotl, who gives birth to herself in the *Codex Borbonicus*, requires the collaborative performance of the Aztec community in order to be reborn. According to Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*, we have no choice but to share our being with each other; there is no being that is not already a “being-with.” Leti is already free, but because her fundamental relationality prevents her from possessing freedom for/by herself, she can only access freedom through the rapture of a story that draws her out of herself to the limit she shares with others. It is on this shared border between beings where real birth takes place—but it is neither a rebirth nor a resurrection, as the image of Tlazolteotl seems to suggest. Leti does not finally create herself when she tells the story of the pigeons to Nol; she *comes to herself* (to her own relationality) when she shares herself out, and in doing so, finds herself *differently*. Thus, the form of Leti’s storytelling is analogous to the content of her story: like the pigeons flying away free, it never

completes but continues to emerge, calling us to the page to meet her at the limit we share—at the limit where we, too, are born. For Nancy, “we never stop being born into community” because community “communicates itself through the repetition and the contagion of births” (67, 60). These births exceed the labors of maternity, liberating women from the good mother/bad mother dichotomy we see in Anaya’s work. As Tlazolteotl’s image from the *Codex Borbonicus* reminds us, women do not have to procreate in order to create. Instead of reducing a woman’s existence to a maternal standard, Nancy offers the community—and all performances of community that expose us to each other, from writing to storytelling to simply “being-with”—as the only viable starting place for being and becoming, regardless of one’s gender.

Lemus may not leave us with any easy answers to the problem of heteronormativity as Anaya attempts to do with his rhetoric of sexual balance, but she does leave us with one woman’s story, told in her own words, to her own queer rhythm. In keeping with Muckelbauer, Lemus’ novel maintains that “problems don’t exist in order to be solved, [but] that we might benefit from learning how to inhabit them instead, to immerse ourselves in them and follow their singular rhythms” (Muckelbauer 127). Despite all attempts to silence Leti by forcing her to conform, her story persists; she immerses us in her idiosyncratic, run-on lilt, summoning us to follow her “singular rhythm” and inhabit the third space alongside her. Leti thus begins to rebuild her community off the page through the transmission of a “common intensity” that moves from the text to the reader like static electricity, compelling us toward self-transformation (Muckelbauer 165).

Or perhaps Muckelbauer puts it more simply with the analogy of a magnetic force (what he calls “inspiration”): Lemus’ writing is “a power divine, impelling you like the power in the stone Euripides called the magnet... This stone does not just attract the iron rings by themselves, but imparts to the rings a force enabling them to do the same as the stone itself” (74). Just as the magnet described by Plato’s Socrates transmits energy between iron rings, bringing them together, Weeping’s static pulse throughout the novel transmits energy between the generations, pulling Nana, Mama Estrella, and Leti together as conduits for a power that surpasses identity and intention to become a constellation of influences and desires that we readers inhabit as well. This “force of self-overcoming” allows Leti to transcend her egocentric depression by carrying her “out of [her]self” and into the community of poiesis (Muckelbauer 74-75). Like the image of Tlazolteotl in the *Codex Borbonicus*, Leti’s voice inspires and is inspired by a community performance.

Rather than prescribing an end to the tyranny of convention, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* gestures toward a future where invention and convention conspire to affirm community and effect communal change beyond the parameters of the book. Leti addresses the reader directly, commanding our attention with the same alluring expression with which Tlazolteotl looks the viewer in the eye. It is interesting to note that Tlazolteotl is the only character in the *Codex Borbonicus* who does so; all other figures are painted in profile as if the viewer has caught them *en medias res*, casually surveying the contemporaneous world of the text

to which they are bound. Just as Leti's pigeon story moves across mediums and temporalities, Tlazolteotl gazes out from the history of the page to the present beyond. Seductively, captivatingly, Leti and Tlazolteotl call us to follow their singular rhythm.

For this human community to come into being both on and off the page, Leti must let Weeping Woman pass away, but she must also be willing to throw her own tiara on the pyre as well. The subject of the novel is not so much Leti's exclusive "coming out," but an inclusive coming-in that welcomes both speaker and reader into a community of queer Chicana antecedents, from Tlazolteotl to Leti's own Nana Lupe—both of whom refuse to stay put in the past. Through the transhistorical dimension of storytelling, we join Leti in renouncing the lonely shadows at the margins of history where La Llorona weeps and reclaiming the kinship that La Llorona was denied. *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* teaches us that the movement toward difference is a movement away from autonomy; thus, it is a communal beginning that requires the end of isolation. In the end, Weeping Woman—and the enduring, albeit dynamic, mythohistorical narrative of female solitude that she represents—must give way to actual, material people so that Leti can begin to build an actual, material community.

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