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Patricia Nelson  
*College of William and Mary*

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**Rewriting Myth: New Interpretations of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen  
de Guadalupe in Chicana Feminist Literature**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Women's Studies from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Patricia Elise Nelson

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(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

\_\_\_\_\_  
John Gamber, Director

\_\_\_\_\_  
Colleen Kennedy

\_\_\_\_\_  
Leisa Meyer

Williamsburg, VA  
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## **Introduction**

In many cultures, women, far more than men, serve as archetypes. The idea of “woman” is simultaneously idealized and vilified; both processes serve to reduce the idea of woman to symbol, rather than acknowledging real women’s complexity. Many of these images appear across cultures, in the stories through which societies define what it means to be male or female and the parameters of acceptable behavior within those roles. The constant repetition of these stories through generations enforces and maintains gender systems, and women who step outside the behavioral boundaries which have been thus defined are punished. Alicia Gaspar de Alba identifies the three archetypal roles available to women within Mexican and Chicana/o<sup>1</sup> culture as “la madre, la virgen, y la puta,” (in English, “the mother, the virgin, and the whore”) (51). Although in reality, women cannot be easily confined to these categories, the ideological structure maintains divisions: all women must be defined by these roles. While some of the roles can develop an uneasy and even untenable coexistence, as in the iconic image of the “Virgin Mother,” others, such as the virgin and the whore, are seen as opposites, demanding a perpetual binary division. As a result, women must constantly attempt to conform to an impossible standard, suppressing their sexuality and privileging male experience in order to be the virgin or mother rather than the whore.

Many Chicana feminist theorists express interest in the reclamation of their

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<sup>1</sup> The word Chicana/o is an alternate term for Americans of Mexican ancestry, and is used instead of “Mexican-American” or “Latina/o” for several reasons. First, the term Chicana/o implies a politicized ethnic identity, as well as recognition of the unique experiences of native-born Americans of Mexican descent. Identifying as “Chicana/o” is a refusal to deny either one’s American identity or Mexican identity. Furthermore, it acknowledges the mixture of two cultures and denies the possibility of separating the two identities; as Juan Bruce-Novoa states, “A Chicano lives in the space between the hyphen of Mexican-American” (39). Sonia Saldívar-Hull expands this definition, asserting, “Since there is no recognized nation-state ‘Chicana’ or ‘Chicano,’ when we invoke Chicana as a self-identifier, we invoke race and ethnicity, class, and gender in their simultaneity and their complexity” (45).

culture's dominant stories, in particular those that regulate gender roles. These stories often reflect the influence of colonizing cultures. Chicanas/os have been doubly colonized, by the Spanish beginning in the sixteenth century and by the United States with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. This agreement ceded most of the Southwest to the United States with the promise that Mexicans already living in these territories would be permitted to keep their land—a pledge that was not honored. Recognizing this history, many Chicana/o theorists attempt to construct a postcolonial conception of Chicana/o culture that extends beyond Spanish and Anglo influences.

In *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Chicana theorist Emma Perez posits a new understanding of the historical consciousness of colonized peoples, the “decolonial imaginary,” in which decolonial is defined as “that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are organized” and the imaginary “conjures fragmented identities, fragmented realities, that are 'real,' but a real that is in question” (6). That is to say, for Perez, Chicana/o history cannot be pinned down or resolved; it must constantly be renegotiated and understood as multiple and unstable. Perez, like many Chicana feminist theorists, introduces an added dimension to this project, recognizing that women's voices and stories have been subordinated not only to a racial colonist mentality but also to a male consciousness. She argues that in typical historical accounts, “women become appendages to men's history, the interstitial 'and' tacked on as an afterthought” (12). However, she also notes that just because certain stories have not yet been told, that does not mean that they do not exist, asserting, “Chicana, Mexicana, India, mestiza actions, words spoken and unspoken, survive and persist whether they are acknowledged

or not” (7). The project of discovering these Chicana voices, often dismissed or subordinated by dominant groups, is ongoing.

The rewriting of myth, which necessarily entails rewriting ideology and cultural norms, operates within this theoretical framework. In Chicana/o culture, three female figures, La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, demarcate the culturally acceptable borders and categories of female behavior. Gloria Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands/La Frontera*,

*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres.* All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother who we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two....In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and la Llorona to make us long-suffering people. (30)

It is the project of Anzaldúa and other Chicana feminist authors to expose how these figures have been used historically and to reimagine them in ways that overturn misogynistic and oppressive ideology. This requires recognition that the cultural presence of these three figures, who fill different yet intersecting female roles, results from centuries of numerous histories, myths, and religions. As Norma Alarcón states, “Feminism is a way of saying that nothing in patriarchy truly reflects women unless we accept distortions – mythic and historical” (189). Chicanas, and especially queer Chicanas, occupy a unique position from which to recognize these distortions.

Theorist Chela Sandoval, in *The Methodology of the Oppressed*, outlines the idea of the “differential consciousness” of oppressed peoples, an ability to shift between different modes of understanding the world without reifying one as truth. Sandoval explains that “differential consciousness,”

represents a cruising, migrant, improvisational mode of subjectivity... prodded into existence by an outsider's sensibilities: a lack of loyalty to dominant ideological signification, combined with the intellectual curiosity that demands an explosion of meaning (in semiotic or deconstructive activities), or meaning's convergence and solidification (in meta-ideologizing), for the sake of either survival or a political change toward equality. (179)

Because of their racial and ethnic border identities and their subordination on the basis of gender and often sexuality, many Chicana feminists are invested in exposing and deconstructing dominant cultural ideologies. Within Chicana/o culture, these ideologies are often revealed and perpetuated through the stories of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe.

Malinche, the Mayan translator for Hernán Cortés, has become one of the most condemned figures in Chicano culture. Although she is an historical figure, historians know little about the details of Malinche’s life. Instead, as her story has been mythologized, her name has come to stand primarily for the betrayal of the Mexican race and the danger of female sexuality. As a young woman, Malinche, along with twenty other women, was given as a gift to Cortés' expedition to Mexico after their victory over the Mayan town of Potonchan (Lanyon 56). Although her childhood and original tribal affiliation are subject to speculation, it is known that she spoke two native languages,

Mayan and Nahuatl, and later learned Spanish (68), a skill which eventually led Cortés to give her the role of translator. In this capacity, she served as the voice in negotiations between the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan and the Spanish conquistadors. Malinche was also Cortés' lover and the mother of his child, Martín Cortés, who is commonly accepted as the first mestizo (person of both Mexican and European blood).<sup>2</sup>

The myth of Malinche emphasizes her sexual relationship with Cortés. As Alarcón states, contemporary Chicana/o culture considers Malinche an “evil goddess and creator of a new race...mother-whore, bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the foreign Spanish invasion” (182). Historian Anna Lanyon chronicles the process, concurrent with the rise of Mexican nationalism, through which Malinche's name became synonymous with “the enemy within [...] the Mexican Eve” (188-9).<sup>3</sup> Some Mexicans and Chicanas/os also refer to her as *La Chingada*, which translates to “the fucked one” or “the violated.” The idea that Malinche, a passive receptacle, was unable or unwilling to resist the sexual conquest of Cortés, a weakness that directly caused the collapse of Aztec civilization, has had clear impact on the way that women are viewed within Chicano society. In the seminal essay about Malinche, “The Sons of La Malinche,” Mexican writer and Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz articulates what has become the most common interpretation of Malinche, as the “violated mother... Her passivity is abject: she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood, and dust. Her taint is

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<sup>2</sup> This claim in itself serves a mythical, rather than historical, purpose. Documents of the time reveal prior relationships between Spanish and indigenous individuals that produced children, notably that of Gonzalo Guerrero, a survivor of the wreck of an earlier Spanish expedition who married a Mayan woman and assimilated into her tribe (Lanyon 67).

<sup>3</sup> The problematic construction of Malinche as an enemy *within*, a traitor, also has political rather than historical origins. Before the Spanish Conquest, Mexico was made up of individual tribes, of which the Aztecs were only one. Because Malinche had no connections with the Aztec tribe before she met Cortés, she was considered an outsider, “an enemy, along with the Spaniards, the Tlaxcans, the Huejotzingans” (Lanyon 188), but not a betrayer of her own people.

constitutional and resides, as we said earlier, in her sex... And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition” (208). Paz extends Malinche's perceived weakness to all women, expressing the belief that because of their sexuality, women inherently pose the threat of betrayal and therefore must be controlled by men. This narrative was especially prominent in the Chicano Movement, when the terms “Malinche” or “vendida” (traitor) were used against women who failed to conform to male authority or expressed feminist concerns (Harris xiv).

The figure of La Llorona, the “Weeping Woman,” holds some similarities to La Malinche, although the origins of her myth are debated. There are many variations of this story, which survives largely through oral tradition rather than dominant discourse and is therefore told differently in distinct communities or regions. The most common telling describes a woman who is sexually betrayed by a man (sometimes her husband), and consequently kills her own children by drowning them in a river. In varying versions, her offenses range from “adultery, infanticide, or child neglect” to “homicidal revenge, excessive hedonism, and self-indulgence” (Candelaria 93). As punishment, La Llorona is doomed to walk the earth searching for her dead children for eternity, and haunts creeks and streams, crying or wailing in pain. The story is told, in part, to frighten child with the threat that if they wander too far from home the ghost of La Llorona will abduct them.

Perhaps because both are failed mothers, some see La Llorona as merely another incarnation of Malinche, but the origins of her myth actually precede the Spanish conquest. Américo Paredes suggests that the legend of La Llorona “struck deep roots in the Mexican tradition because it was grafted on an Indian [Nahuatl] legend cycle about the supernatural woman who seduces men when they are out alone on the roads or



working in the fields” (103). Other scholars have traced the origins of La Llorona to Cihuacoatl, or “Woman Serpent,” a deity who dates back to the Toltecs and was later appropriated by the Aztecs. Cihuacoatl was said to walk through the city at night, crying for her children; her wails were considered an omen of war (Leal 136). Although originally a venerated goddess, Cihuacoatl was demonized after the Conquest, linked to sacrifice and abductions of children (137). Her once great influence among the Aztec people was forgotten as she was reduced to La Llorona, ostensibly a bedtime story to frighten children which also warns of the danger of women. Cherríe Moraga suggests that the story of La Llorona functions as another way to reinforce the idea of woman as inherently sinful, an “aberration, criminal against nature” (*Loving 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed* 145). Cordelia Candelaria offers a more elaborate analysis of the story's messages, stating that, “On its face the tale teaches that girls get punished for conduct for which men are rewarded; that pleasure, especially sexual gratification, is sinful for women; that female independence and personal agency create monsters capable of destroying even their offspring; that children are handy pawns in the revenge chess of jealousy, and other lessons of similar scapegoating orthodoxy” (94). La Llorona, like La Malinche, is an iconic example of the bad woman and failed mother.

In contrast to these images of failed or corrupted womanhood stands the figure of La Virgen of Guadalupe. Catholic tradition maintains that in 1531, as the Catholic Church instilled itself as the religious authority in Mexico and forbade indigenous religions, an apparition appeared to the recently converted Aztec peasant Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac. She identified herself as the Virgin Mother. Juan Diego rushed to tell the Catholic authorities of the miracle, but, doubted by the bishop, was instructed to bring

proof of the appearance. Upon his return to Tepeyac, the Virgin instructed Juan Diego to pick the flowers that, although it was winter, miraculously grew on the hill. He collected the flowers in his cloak, returned to the church, and opened them cloak to reveal not only the flowers, but an exquisite image of the Virgin printed there.

Since then, Guadalupe has acquired extreme importance in both Mexican and Chicana culture, as one element of the Catholic tradition that is for Mexico alone. As Anzaldúa states, “La Virgen de Guadalupe is the single most potent religious, political, and cultural image of the Chicano/Mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered” (30). Many scholars believe that the figure of Guadalupe has roots in traditional Aztec goddesses, evolving from Aztec fertility and earth goddesses that were eradicated after the conquest. Before the arrival of the Spaniards in Mexico, nine of the fourteen Aztec fertility gods were female (Cardozo-Freeman 12), including Coatlicue (Serpent Skirt), an earth goddess who is mother of the moon and stars, but also represents death. Indeed, Tepeyac was originally the site of a temple devoted to the Aztec earth and fertility goddess Tonantzin, referred to as “Our Lady Mother” (Wolf 35), who was venerated in pre-Hispanic Mexican culture. Among other reasons, this has led to the common belief that the Virgin of Guadalupe, the modern Mexican “master symbol... standing for life, for hope, for health” (37), is the product of a “syncretic revival of Coatlicue/ Tonantzin” (Goldman 170), the Aztec earth goddesses. Although this master symbol is female, she is often framed within Chicano and Mexican culture as an opposition to Malinche, reinforcing the virgin/whore dichotomy.

Consistently reproduced over generations, these myths are central to understanding, and even shaping, the ideologies and assumptions of Chicano culture. Norma Alarcón illuminates the hegemonic means of transmission of these stories when she states that the myth “pervades not only male thought but ours too as it seeps into our own consciousness in the cradle through their eyes as well as our mothers', who are entrusted with the transmission of culture” (183). As stories are repeated, they are internalized; the messages they convey persist even when the stories themselves are no longer strictly believed. About La Llorona, Cordelia Candelaria states, “What I heard about her as a child is unforgettable, even though I realize that my unrestrained imagination was as much responsible for her image in my mind as anything I heard. Fear and innocence offer the perfect chemistry for mythmaking” (95). Attempting to arrest the cycle through which mothers pass onto their daughters stories which limit them, Chicana feminist writers interrogate or rewrite these foundational myths, and in doing so reconceive the role of women in Chicano culture.

While these three figures also hold significance for Mexican constructions of womanhood, Chicanas/os are largely responsible for reimagining and rewriting projects, perhaps because their border identities between two cultures create more opportunity for transgression, as well as a greater capability and desire to think outside of a single tradition. Author and activist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican immigrant to the United States, describes that within the United States, iconic Mexican figures take on added significance and multiple meanings. He claims that Chicana/os hold on to Guadalupe in particular as a “symbol of contestation against Anglo culture,” and as a result, her image has frequently been “expropriated, reactivated, recontextualized, and

turned into a symbol of resistance” (180). Furthermore, Gómez-Peña is very clear that this is specifically a Chicana/o process, saying, “as a Mexican immigrant in the process of Chicanization, I have learned to understand that symbols, no matter how charged they might be, can be emptied out and refilled...and that I, as a border citizen, must constantly reinvent my identity using all the elements that my three cultures have provided me with” (183). Chicanas have motivation to maintain a connection to these figures in order to hold on to elements of their Mexican heritage, yet, recognizing them as problematic, they draw on the fragmentation of their border identities to complicate and redefine the figures' meanings. Sandra Cisneros explains that this conflict takes on an added dimension for women, stating that, “Part of being [Chicana] is that love and that affinity we have for our *cultura*.... [Yet] I felt, as a teenager, that I could not inherit my culture intact without revising some parts of it.... We accept our culture, but not without adapting it to ourselves as women” (Arnada 66). Jean Wyatt reinforces this argument when she says, “A woman living on the border has a better chance of shaking off the hold of any single culture’s gender definition because she has to move back and forth between Mexican and Anglo signifying systems” (245). Revising myth allows Chicana authors to maintain a link to the traditions and stories that they associate with Mexican culture while still asserting a female or feminist perspective.

Four of the authors at the forefront of this effort in cultural revision are Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Ana Castillo. Although each address the figures of Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe in different literary forms, ranging from critical essays to plays, poetry, novels, and short stories, they continue to influence each other’s work. In one interview, Sandra Cisneros stated, “Things that Cherríe says,

things that Ana says, make me feel like going to my typewriter and responding” (Saeta 137). The project of this paper will then be not only to look at the ways which each individual author engages with the three mythological figures, but also to contextualize them in dialogue with each other.

In her essay “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” (1996) and her short story “Woman Hollering Creek” (1991), Sandra Cisneros reinterprets La Llorona and La Virgen de Guadalupe as figures of freedom rather than repression and uses them to draw attention to social issues. “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” from the essay collection *Goddess of the Americas*, rewrites the myth of La Virgen de Guadalupe to consider the implications of the silence surrounding Chicana sexuality. In reinserting sex into the idealized, purified image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, Cisneros transforms Guadalupe from an unattainable representation of perfect femininity to an identifiable figure that legitimizes female sexuality. She undertakes a similar project in the short story “Woman Hollering Creek,” complicating and finding strength in a mythological figure that has traditionally been one-dimensional and used to limit women. In this story, she uses the myth of La Llorona to recast La Llorona from a doomed child-murderer to a wronged woman finally given a voice, free to scream.

In a series of critical essays written over a period of twenty years, Cherríe Moraga attempts to reconcile her identity as a lesbian with a Chicana/o culture that largely condemns non-normative sexualities. Ultimately, Moraga envisions La Llorona as her personal link to the heritage from which she has felt excluded because of her sexuality. This traditionally maligned figure becomes her sister; through La Llorona's deviance,

Moraga finds a place in *la raza*<sup>4</sup>. Moraga's reclamation of La Llorona as an identifiable figure for the Chicana lesbian mother culminates in her play *The Hungry Woman* (2001), which understands La Llorona's murder of her children as an attempt to halt the reproduction of a patriarchal system. Throughout the play, Moraga uses the myth of La Llorona to critique the normative Chicano family structure, as well as the sexism and heterosexism of Chicano Nationalism.

Taking an approach that extends beyond rewriting specific myths, Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993) traces the process through which women are mythologized, ultimately creating an alternative female archetype that engages with indigenous traditions, female strength, and lesbian sexuality. The novel, which chronicles the exceptional events that surround a woman named Sofi and her four daughters in the town of Tome, New Mexico, also critiques the iconization of women by the institution of the Catholic Church, ascribing many limiting views of women within Chicana/o culture to the Church's idealization of female saints.

Finally, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), a collection of critical essays and poetry, Gloria Anzaldúa deconstructs the divisions between La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, returning to the earlier Aztec goddess Coatlicue to expose the duality already inherent in the traditions of all three figures. In doing this, she draws on the ways female icons have been warped throughout history to serve a male agenda, using the portrayals of the three figures to discuss women's oppression by colonizing cultures. Finally, she incorporates these newly complicated figures into her own quest for self-knowledge, which is in itself necessarily fragmented and multiple.

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<sup>4</sup> The term *la raza* translates to "the race" or "the people," and is used to refer to those who have both Indian and Spanish ancestry—a new, blended race. As used by Chicanas/os, it evokes pride in a common heritage.

Cisneros, Moraga, Castillo, and Anzaldúa engage with myth as a means through which culture is reproduced. As they interrogate the ideologies and assumptions advanced by the stories of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, these four authors expose and complicate the underlying messages that Chicanas/os internalize from childhood in the form of myth. Subverting the power of dominant archetypes that delimit only certain paths for women, each author creates in their place the potential for new mythology that is flexible and unstable, allowing for multiplicity and complexity. As recovered, resignified, or rewritten by Cisneros, Moraga, Castillo, and Anzaldúa, the purpose of female icons becomes not to prescribe or prohibit certain behaviors for women, but to reflect the real conditions of Chicanas' lives and help them understand their own border identities.

**Chapter One: Reclaiming La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Llorona in Sandra Cisneros' "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" and "Woman Hollering Creek"**

In her essays, short stories, and poetry, Sandra Cisneros references a wide range of mythology, media, culture, and language in an attempt to represent and understand the unique factors that influence contemporary Chicana identity. In the critical essay "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" (1996), Cisneros discusses her own experiences as a young woman afraid to buy birth control or see herself nude to critique the repression of female sexuality in Chicana culture. Her complicated relationship with her body and sexuality is framed in terms of her changing understanding of La Virgen de Guadalupe. The short story "Woman Hollering Creek" (1991), a modern retelling of the La Llorona myth, also combines a mythological framework with a contemporary story to give both new meaning. The story begins as Cleófilas Hernández, a Mexican woman who dreams of finding love like she sees on *telenovelas* [Mexican soap operas], leaves her father's house to cross the border to Texas with her new husband, Juan Pedro. However, he soon becomes abusive and unfaithful, and a pregnant Cleófilas employs the help of two Chicana women, Graciela and Felice, to help her and her son, Juan Pedrito, return to her family in Mexico. In "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" and "Woman Hollering Creek," Sandra Cisneros modernizes the mythological figures of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Llorona to draw attention to the fear of female sexuality and the cycle of domestic violence within Chicana/o culture, ultimately recoding both La Virgen and La Llorona as figures of freedom rather than repression.

*"Guadalupe the Sex Goddess: La Virgen de Guadalupe and Female Sexuality*

Within Chicana/o culture, sexuality is generally acceptable or acknowledged only in the context of heterosexual marriage. As a result, from the time of a girl's first



menstruation, parents remain largely silent in regards to informing young girls about their bodies or about sexual intercourse. In psychologist Aida Hurtado's 2003 study of young Chicanas, 55 percent of respondents never had an explicit talk with their parents about menstruation and 64 percent had never had a parental discussion about sexuality in general (51). As a result of this lack of information, many Chicanas believe that “good girls” do not talk about sexuality and that women ought to be ashamed of their sexual desires. The high value placed on female virginity and the cultural condemnation of sexual activity creates a clear division between virgin and whore with no intermediate category; as a result, the only socially acceptable option for women is to repress their sexuality. Ana Castillo states, “At the very moment when an adolescent's sexual consciousness emerges the censorship of adults begins. This is a major tragedy for young women, who especially begin to view their physical desire as something that should be occulted, that is sinful” (*Massacre* 123). Accordingly, the body itself becomes not a site of pleasure, but of danger. Anthropologist Patricia Zavella further suggests that for much of Mexican history,

The body was seen as a map, a document to be read by others regarding women's possible transgressions and a source of betrayal if women did not control how they moved or displayed themselves in public. At the same time, women's bodies were seen as uncontrollable, subject to the whims of passion. Thus, women's bodies were policed, their reputations guarded, and the consequences for transgressions were severe. (238)

The silence surrounding Chicana sexuality has numerous harmful results, particularly lack of information about birth control and pregnancy, negative feelings about one's own

body, and a difficulty in taking control of one's own desires, and these insecurities about sexuality often perpetuate a cycle of silence.

The cultural demand that women distance themselves from their bodies and sexuality in order to maintain social acceptability is reinforced by Catholic doctrines that uphold the Virgin Mary and La Virgen de Guadalupe as the primary models of ideal womanhood. Within this tradition, menstruation is a source of shame<sup>5</sup> and sexual intercourse should be only for the purpose of reproduction. Author Rosario Ferré describes the messages she received as a child in Catholic Mass, listening to the bishop speak about the Immaculate Conception:

To be immaculate meant to be without sin, pure like the lilies that grew at *la Immaculada's* feet. And this could be achieved only if the wife managed to keep herself detached from earthly passion. Even during the holy act of procreation, when her husband was making love to her, she should remain pure. Then, when she died her body and soul would rise up on a cloud and attain heaven, like the Virgin. (84)

Although Ferré writes from a Puerto Rican rather than Chicana context, her observations shed light on the function of Catholic virgin saints within Mexican and Chicana/o religious language as well, where they further serve as a model for female sexual behavior. That is, every “good” woman should strive to emulate the purity of the Virgin.

Cisneros' essay “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” challenges this silencing of female sexuality in Chicana culture by rewriting La Virgen de Guadalupe as a model for women to embrace the complexities of their own sexual desires. In order to do this, Cisneros both looks back to the pre-Conquest roots of Guadalupe and interrogates her own life

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Leviticus 15:19-30 explicitly states that a woman is unclean while menstruating.

experiences to find new meaning and relevance in the myth. Cisneros states in one interview that, “The issue of redefining myself or controlling my own destiny or my own sexuality... is a ghost I'm still wrestling with” (Aranda 67). It is fitting, then, that Cisneros frames the recontextualization of Guadalupe within the context of her own life. She begins the essay with personal stories of her discomfort with sexuality, her body, and contraception in an attempt to dispel the mystery and silence surrounding female sexuality. In this way, Cisneros refuses to make her life conform to the proper image of womanhood, placing a value on lived experience rather than iconic ideals.

In contrast to her lived experience, Cisneros recognizes the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe sanctioned by the Catholic Church to be unattainable. Furthermore, she acknowledges the gendered nature of the presentation of religious icons—while women are expected to be above earthy desires and strive to duplicate the example of La Virgen, or face social stigma, there is greater space for men to be recognized as individuals. Cisneros argues that La Virgen de Guadalupe was “an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable. Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus? I never saw any evidence of it. They were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and pointed us women toward our destiny—marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was *putahood*” (“Goddess” 48). Within the Mexican Catholic tradition, Guadalupe is used as a means of regulating behavior and directing women towards the limited roles which have historically been acceptable; her function is to circumscribe women's options, marking and glorifying women's only available path. In reality, Cisneros points out, no woman conforms to this one-dimensional standard—on the contrary, she states, “In my neighborhood I knew only real women, neither saints nor whores” (48). However,

because this middle ground is not culturally recognized, any element of desire represents a failure to conform to the ideal of Guadalupe and as a result produces guilt. Therefore, as employed by the Catholic Church as a master symbol of purity, Guadalupe is confining and lacks relevance to contemporary Chicanas.

Yet rather than abandoning La Virgen de Guadalupe as a symbol, Cisneros proceeds in "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" to reinvent the Guadalupe myth, imagining her as an icon that reflects the real sexuality of women rather than forcing its suppression. Cisneros expands Guadalupe's meaning by drawing from the figure's indigenous roots, as well as from her own personal history. The discovery of a more complex Guadalupe is, in a sense, a recovery project; Cisneros states, "Like every woman who matters to me, I have had to search for her in the rubble of history" (49). The difficulty of uncovering the intricacies of the Guadalupe myth reflects the multiple colonizations that have attempted to erase Chicana history. Cisneros first mines pre-Conquest traditions, both Aztec and pre-Aztec, to identify the multitude of mythological figures already subsumed into Guadalupe as she is presently portrayed. As previously mentioned, many historians consider Guadalupe an incarnation of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin, adapted to the mythology of the Catholic Church in order to survive after the Spanish Conquest. Tonantzin was the Aztec earth mother, associated with fertility and sustenance and worshiped as the "Mother of the Corn." However, even as constructed by the Aztecs, the figure of Tonantzin had already been stripped of much of her creationary power and her sexuality. When Aztec society shifted from a wandering tribe to a hierarchical state, the idea of a mother goddess who embodies coexisting dualities of life and death diminished in favor of a tendency to "split consciousness into opposing dichotomies, implying that

we are divinely created with a dual nature” (Castillo, *Massacre* 105). In searching for the multiplicity in Tonantzin, and thus Guadalupe, Cisneros looks to “the pantheon of other mother goddesses” inside her, including Tlazolteotl, “the patron of sexual passion” and Tlaelcuani, “the filth eater” (“Goddess” 49). She recognizes that Tlazolteotl “is a duality of maternity *and* sexuality. In other words, she is one sexy mama” (49). Contextualizing Guadalupe within these figures reveals that she, like a real woman, refuses dualistic divisions between virgin/mother and whore; instead, components of both are present inside her.

This newly complicated goddess can then be identified with Cisneros' personal history and used for self-understanding. She states, “For [Guadalupe] to approach me, for me to finally open the door and accept her, she had to be a woman like me” (50). In order for a mythological female figure to be relevant, Cisneros must find or create a myth that relates to her own personal experience. By rewriting Guadalupe, Cisneros addresses what she finds problematic about the figure, her connotations of sexual purity, without having to disregard her as symbol. Critic Jean Wyatt argues that, “Cisneros considers Mexican icons of femininity to be innately bound up with individual Chicanas’ and Mexican women’s self esteem; to live with them comfortably—and there is no way to run away from them—each woman has to ‘make her peace with them’ in her own way” (244). Through Guadalupe, Cisneros redefines the meaning of Chicana sexuality by delegitimizing the binary division between virgin and whore and by giving women a model for a complex and multiple, rather than idealized, female sexuality.

In addition, once reclaimed, the Mexican and indigenous roots of the sexual Guadalupe provide Cisneros with a means to combat Anglo culture and popular media’s

conflation of desirable sexuality with whiteness. There is a degree to which holding the virginal Guadalupe as a dominant symbol of womanhood responds to a continued Anglo colonization. Modern American culture and media constructs white bodies as pure and good and brown bodies as inherently perverse or corrupt. As Ferré points out, Guadalupe is the only Catholic virgin saint who is not white (80). As a result, she has taken on significant cultural meaning in both Mexican and Chicana/o cultures; however, part of this meaning continues to rest on the direct parallel of her purity and holiness to that of the white Virgin Mary. In the essay, Cisneros recounts a memory of watching a pornographic film, and the disturbance she felt when she saw the white film star's shaved vagina and “realized that my own sex had no resemblance to this woman's” (“Goddess” 51). Few role models for acceptable Chicana female sexuality exist within popular culture of the United States. Cisneros makes Guadalupe this sexual icon. She closes the essay with the assertion that, “When I see La Virgen de Guadalupe I want to lift her dress like I did my dolls' and see if she comes with chones, and does her panocha look like mine, and does she have dark nipples too? Yes, I am certain she does.... Blessed art thou, Lupe, and therefore, blessed am I” (51). Ultimately, in reconstructing to the myth of La Virgen de Guadalupe to characterize her as a “sex goddess” rather than only as a “virgin mother,” Cisneros criticizes the silencing of female sexuality within Chicana culture and provides a historically-rooted mythological framework through which Chicanas can take pride in their own bodies and sexualities.

*“Woman Hollering Creek:” La Llorona and Cycles of Violence*

In her short story “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cisneros undertakes a similar project, rewriting the myth of La Llorona with a revised ending and message. The

protagonist of this story, Cleófilas Hernández, a young married woman, is a modernized characterization of La Llorona who embodies elements from several different versions of the legend, including domestic abuse and a husband's infidelity. By evoking a myth familiar to a Chicana audience, Cisneros draws on common knowledge that places the short story within a very specific cultural context. In addition, Cisneros juxtaposes the traditional oral myth of La Llorona with allusions to popular media as modern myth, illuminating how the two work together within Chicana culture to advance certain expectations and behaviors. Finally, she shifts the meaning of the Llorona story by giving it a new ending that advances female strength rather than victimization and presents female support structures and family as a way to escape from cycles of abuse. As with Cisneros' resignification of Guadalupe in "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess," the modern retelling of the story of La Llorona in "Woman Hollering Creek" rewrites the myth in order to make La Llorona a positive, relevant model that can help contemporary Chicanas negotiate a new place in their culture and claim their own voices.

In many of the short stories in *Woman Hollering Creek*, Cisneros strives to represent the specificity of Chicana experience, drawing on linguistic or cultural cues in order to contextualize her stories within a specific cultural framework. In the title story, Cisneros' decision to switch between English and Spanish situates the story in a border context and raises questions about the inevitable shift in meaning through translation. Feminist theorist Ofelia Schutte argues that in cross-cultural exchanges, there is always a degree of incommensurability, a "residue of meaning that cannot be reached" (50)—it is impossible for translation to convey all the connotations and nuances of meaning associated with language. Harryette Mullen suggests that Cisneros and other Chicana/o

authors, “aesthetically and ideologically exploit the slippage of nonstandard dialects between error and deviation” (5). Schuette's principle of the incommensurability of language takes on an added dimension when applied to a hybrid language like Tex-Mex, which draws on both Spanish and English but strictly follows the rules of neither. By employing a combination of English and Spanish, Cisneros makes use of the meaning created through a constant shift between two languages and sign systems, each of which carries its own ideology.

In “Woman Hollering Creek,” language is particularly important in destabilizing and resignifying the myth of La Llorona. Because the Llorona myth is largely transmitted as an oral story, its details and precise meanings are adaptable to the cultural needs of varying locations—even what La Llorona is called differs based on region. Within the context of the story, this variation in naming allows for the flexibility to re-encode meaning in the myth. Wyatt claims that, “Fixed definitions waver as the words in which they are moored lose their stability” (244), and Cisneros utilizes this instability by giving La Llorona three names within her story. As “Woman Hollering Creek” begins, Cleófilas, the main character, crosses with her new husband from Mexico, where she lived with her father and six brothers, to Texas; we are told that as a child in Mexico, Cleófilas heard traditional stories of La Llorona, which translates as “The Wailing Woman” (*Creek* 46). Upon arriving in Texas, however, she lives next to a creek called by the English name “Woman Hollering, a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood. *Pues allá de los indios, quién sabe* [Oh, that’s from the Indians, who knows]” (46). Cisneros intends the reader to make the connection between “Woman Hollering Creek” and the myth of La Llorona. However, initially Cleófilas, who does not



speak English, does not associate the two, and instead translates the name of the creek to La Gritona, “The Yelling Woman.” The slightly different connotations of the two names allows for an expansion from “wailing,” associated only with passive suffering, to a yell, which Cleófilas initially associates with “pain or rage” (47). Ultimately, the name “La Gritona” is pliable enough to encompass a “yell as loud as mariachi... a hoot... a holler like Tarzan” (55), a scream which serves as affirmation and assertion rather than pain or suffering. Mullen claims that, “Translating from ‘La Llorona’ to ‘La Gritona’ to the English ‘Woman Hollering Creek’ allows a greater set of possibilities for interpreting the cry of the restless spirit” (12). In this way, the blended language and translation that exists on the border becomes a site of meaning in itself.

In addition, by juxtaposing allusions to La Llorona with Cleófilas’ admiration of women in *telenovelas* and popular culture, Cisneros paints contemporary popular media as a modern myth which carries on themes of traditional stories to perpetuate negative models for women. Asked in an interview about modern mythology, Cisneros answered, “I think that there are urban myths, modern myths, only we can’t tell which ones are really going to last. I think that maybe the visual is taking the place of the oral myth.... [Television] is our common mythology, that’s what we all have in common” (Aranda 77). Like mythology, popular media provides a set of common codes shared amongst a culture, reinforcing gender roles and creating expectations for a certain type of lifestyle. As a child and young woman, Cleófilas watches *telenovelas* and listens to popular songs which tell her that “to suffer for love is good. The pain is all sweet somehow. In the end” (*Creek* 45). The idea that for women suffering is an inherent part of love that must passively be accepted echoes the message advanced by the story of La Llorona. While

for La Llorona, the only way out of an abusive relationship is through suicide and murder, the *telenovelas* encourage women to stay with abusive men despite pain, with the promise that a happy ending will eventually result. Wyatt argues that the pairing of the La Llorona story with elements of popular media “implies that then, now, and always the ideals of femininity that Mexican popular culture presents to its women are models of pain and suffering” (254).

However, Cisneros’ rewriting of the Llorona story implies that the mythology passed down through oral tradition is more adaptable than the closed system of meaning advanced by television. A form of media which is controlled by forces outside the community and whose meaning resists adaptation to lived circumstances, *telenovelas* continually lack relevance to the individual. When her marriage fails to be the happy ending she had imagined, Cleófilas attempts to apply the model of *telenovelas* to her life, but finds it impossible. “Cleófilas thought her life would have to be like that, like a *telenovela*, only now the episodes got sadder and sadder. And there were no commercials in between for comic relief. And no happy ending in sight... Everything happened to women with names like jewels. But what happened to Cleófilas? Nothing. Nothing but a crack in the face” (*Creek* 53). The mythology of the *telenovela* follows a trajectory that Cleófilas cannot adapt to her own circumstances. She can only attempt to follow the model presented; when that fails, she is reduced to passive acceptance.

In contrast, the myth of La Llorona retains flexibility, especially in the border spaces between cultures occupied by Chicanas/os. Fluidity of language and meaning enable Cleófilas, with the help of two Chicana women of her community, Graciela and Felice, to change the fate of the abused woman from one of violence and death to one of

possibility, escape, and personal strength. Through Cleófilas, whose name means “daughter of history” (Saldívar-Hull 118), Cisneros changes the ending of the story of La Llorona, creating a different way out of domestic abuse through female networks, return to the family, and embracing border identity. In contrast to the traditional myth, which concludes with eternal hopeless wailing, in “Woman Hollering Creek” Cisneros recasts La Llorona’s crying as Felice’s “Tarzan holler,” a scream of freedom rather than pain.

Felice and Graciela are in a unique position to help Cleófilas. As Chicanas, and thus border women, they are both outsiders and insiders in both Anglo and Mexican cultures, allowing them to take what they need from each without being confined by either. As Sonia Saldívar-Hull states, “their existence on the borders of the mainstream informs their perception of the possibilities available to them” (103). Graciela (Grace, in Spanish), a nurse, sees the marks of domestic abuse when Cleófilas goes to the hospital for a sonogram, and secures a ride to the bus station for Cleófilas with her friend Felice (Happy). Because the two women are bilingual, they are able to communicate with Cleófilas, who only speaks Spanish, as well as to navigate the English-speaking world at large in a way that she cannot. Evoking Chela Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness, Graciela and Felice use their ability to move between cultures in order to help Cleófilas, who is confined by her inability to navigate the borderlands. The responsibility that Graciela feels for Cleófilas arises from a sense that women have the responsibility to help each other when they can. Graciela pleads with Felice, “If we don’t help her, who will?” (*Creek* 54). Indeed, Wyatt reads Felice’s final holler as she crosses the creek as “a call to arms, to the cause of female solidarity” (258). Only through this

female network does it become possible for Cleófilas to escape the cycle of domestic violence in which she is trapped.

In addition, for Cleófilas, Felice demonstrates the viability of female behavior that exists outside of normative cultural expectations. Unlike the models of La Llorona or of *telenovela* characters, Felice is strong and independent, and above all, her identity is not dependant on a relationship with a man. “Everything about this woman, this Felice, amazed Cleófilas. The fact that she drove a pickup. A pickup, mind you, but when Cleófilas asked if it was her husband’s, she said she didn’t have a husband. The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it” (*Creek* 55). Felice exists within a different set of cultural cues, and is therefore more able to break out of rigid gender norms. Unlike Cleófilas, Felice has a playful and ironic relationship with iconic images of women. “Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she's the Virgin. I guess you're only famous if you're a virgin. She was laughing again” (55). By recognizing how these images operate within society, Felice is able to read them against their intended purpose, using them to interrogate and recognize humor in the ways that women’s roles are constructed. In addition, her distance from traditional Mexican culture means that Felice does not even identify “Woman Hollering Creek” with La Llorona; instead, she chooses to understand the idea of a hollering woman in terms of a woman given the freedom to speak. When removed from their original cultural significations, then, as they are for Felice, even negative myths of women can produce entirely different meanings.

Furthermore, Cisneros’ modern rewriting of the Llorona story reclaims the relationship between parent and child as significant and enduring, in contrast to the

corrupted and violent motherhood presented by the original myth. In the traditional story of La Llorona, she is defined in terms of her romantic relationship; the continued existence of the family is dependent on the success of the relationship between mother and father. Therefore, the traditional La Llorona believes that to leave her abusive husband, she must kill her children. Early on in Cisneros' story, there is a sense that Cleófilas loves her child, but does not know how to escape from her situation. "Now, when she and Juan Pedrito sat by the creek's edge. How when a man and a woman love each other, sometimes that love sours. But a parent's love for a child, a child's for its parents, is another thing altogether" (43). By pairing the image of the creek with a discussion of parental love, Cisneros suggests that Cleófilas may repeat the violent solution of La Llorona. However, the ending of the story reveals that Cleófilas can escape from her husband *with* her children; although she abandons her role in the two-parent family, this escape does not have to be marked by violence. As Cleófilas takes her son, Juan Pedrito, and escapes over the creek in which La Llorona drowned her children in the original myth, Cisneros shows a new way to be a "good" mother. Jacqueline Doyle reads this crossing as Cleófilas' escape from the cycle of pain that trapped La Llorona, stating that the ending shows a model through which women can "choose life instead of death and to cross the river instead of remaining eternally trapped on its banks" (59). By taking her child when she leaves her husband to return home, Cleófilas can fulfill her own needs while she takes care of her children; in fact, by removing herself from an abusive situation, she does what is best for them as well.

Certainly, the fact that this escape from domination by her husband leads Cleofilás back to her father's home in Mexico, which is described as a place of "chores

that never ended , six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man's complaints" (*Creek* 43), raises questions of whether Cleofilás is merely trading one oppressive situation for another. The patriarchal structure of the family in Mexican and Chicana/o culture has been frequently discussed by Chicana feminists, many of who claim that the Mexican or Chicana/o family "is based on masculinist notions that emphasize men's supposedly natural superiority and authority over women. Women's role in the Chicano family is primarily to serve men" (Saldívar-Hull 30). Within this context, a return to the family may seem to undercut the freedom that Cleófilas achieves. However, this return can also be read as Cisneros' reclamation of the family, and Mexico, as a source of love and strength. Although Cisneros certainly recognizes the patriarchal family as flawed, suggesting that it was the lack of a female support structure within Cleófilas' family that leads to her reliance on *telenovelas* as a way to understand the world, she also refuses to disown Mexican culture and family as irrevocably broken. Indeed, it is her father's parting words to her, "I am your father, I will never abandon you" (*Creek* 43), that Cleófilas draws on when she gathers the courage to leave her husband.

Many feminist theorists of color have pointed out that women of color do not have the luxury to disassociate themselves entirely from the men of their cultures. In the Combahee River Collective's revolutionary "Black Feminist Statement," they state, "We find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously....We struggle together with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men about sexism" (65). By returning Cleófilas to her home, Cisneros acknowledges the impossibility for Mexican women of removing themselves abruptly and entirely from patriarchal society. However, when

Cleófilas returns to her father's house, she tells her father and brothers stories of Felice, and brings a perspective on different ways of negotiating gender roles gained from the borderlands (*Creek* 56). There is a sense that perhaps Cleófilas' changed understanding of women's roles can be conveyed to her family, and that this revision of what it means to be a Chicana can extend outwards to change culture from the inside.

Finally, when Felice hollers like Tarzan as she crosses the creek, Cisneros adapts La Llorona's wail from one of eternal suffering to one of affirmation and joy. One of the interesting elements of the La Llorona myth is that although Chicana/o culture condemns her, La Llorona remains one of the few iconic female figures who has been given a voice by history. Mullen argues, "Paradoxically, La Llorona, a woman silenced in life, wails her grief in death. Cleófilas learns to decode a feminist message of survival in the haunted voice of the creek that hollers with the rage of the silenced woman" (12). Certainly, the fact that the silenced woman is given voice through La Llorona is important; however, Mullen's focus on grief or rage misses one of the most significant reversals of this ending. Felice's cry comes not from a place of pain, but instead works to affirm women's pride, boldness, and right to a loud and unmediated voice.

Can you imagine, when we crossed the arroyo, she just started yelling like a crazy... Just like that. Who would've thought? Who would've? Pain or rage, perhaps, but not a hoot like the one Felice had just let go. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, Felice had said. Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn't Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water. (*Creek* 56)

It is not only survival that Cleófilas finds in Felice's holler, an adaptation of La Llorona's wail—it is laughter, and in that laughter Felice and La Llorona blend together in her mind to become a new kind of iconic woman. Like Cisneros' sex goddess incarnation of Guadalupe, this new female model is based in myth, but not confined by it; Doyle asserts that Felice's cry, "releases new mother tongues" (54). In her rewriting of the La Llorona myth, Cisneros creates a model for freedom and escape from the cycle of violence, generating a new understanding of Chicana/o motherhood and gender roles.

In her rewritings of La Virgen de Guadalupe in "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" and of La Llorona in "Woman Hollering Creek," Cisneros modernizes mythology to make it relevant to contemporary Chicanas. By finding multiplicity and complexity in mythological figures whose stories are often told within the context of a single meaning, Cisneros holds on to the Chicana/o tradition and history present in these figures while adapting them so that they no longer confine women. In both pieces, Cisneros raises the issue that the Church, the media, and oral traditions all lack positive female role models for Chicanas. By reconceiving La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Llorona, she recreates those figures, adding new meaning to their traditional stories to reconstruct these two figures "from the rubble of history" ("Goddess" 49).



**Chapter Two: Queering *la Familia* and *la Raza*: La Llorona as Lesbian Mother in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea***

Much of the work of Chicana lesbian feminist theorist and playwright Cherríe Moraga focuses on the intersections of class, race, gender and sexuality in the development and understanding of identity. Moraga's first book, *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* (1983), a combination of poetry and autobiographical essays, is often viewed as one of the foundational texts of third world feminist theory and a precursor to queer theory. In negotiating her own relationship to Chicana/o culture, Moraga draws on cultural myths and traditions; in particular, in the condemned figures of La Malinche and La Llorona, she finds a way to understand her own marginalized place as queer within a culture based on a patriarchal family structure. By recovering and reclaiming the deviance of traditional female figures, Moraga uses a tradition of women transgressing cultural boundaries to critique her own culture from within. Moraga advances these themes in her play, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001), which takes place in a futuristic world where the Aztec state of Aztlán has replaced the United States and all queers have been forced out. Chronicling the experiences of Medea and her lover Luna in raising Medea's son, Chac Mool, the play draws on mythology, including the La Llorona myth, to call into question Chicana/o culture's construction of race, gender, sexuality, and motherhood. Like La Llorona, Medea murders her son, but Moraga frames this as an act of cultural loyalty, Medea's attempt to halt or resist the oppressive cycles of her own culture. In *The Hungry Woman*, Moraga rewrites La Llorona as the marginalized lesbian mother, drawing on mythology to critique the contemporary construction of a sexist and heterosexist narrative within Chicano Nationalism and the normative Chicana/o family.

Three of Moraga's critical essays provide a background for the cultural, political, and mythological issues which she grapples with in *The Hungry Woman*. In "A Long Line of Vendidas" (1983), she addresses the tendency of the Chicano family to privilege sons over daughters, and the continued use of the Malinche myth in popular discourse and the Chicano Movement to perpetuate this male-first system. "Queer Aztlán" (1993) outlines Moraga's critique of the exclusion of queers in the ideology of Chicano Nationalism and the symbolism of the imagined indigenous homeland of Aztlán. Finally, in "Looking for the Insatiable Woman" (2000), Moraga excavates the mythological roots of La Llorona, reading her as a sister in order to use her story to understand what it means to be a contemporary Chicana. Because reading *The Hungry Woman* demands a familiarity with this theoretical and historical context, I will first undertake a brief overview the issues that these three essays address.

Traditionally, the Chicano family has been headed by and centered around males, and maintains strict divisions of gender roles. Chicana feminists have struggled to balance critiques of the patriarchal family with continued loyalty to their culture and heritage. In the 1977 essay "The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement," Sonia A. López states,

The family structure in the traditional Chicano household is headed by the husband, who exercises authority. He is the main provider for the family; consequently, the economic situation of the woman is directly related to her dependency on him. In Mexican culture, the role of the Mexicana/Chicana, whether single or married, has been to serve her family, particularly the men: her fathers, brothers, husband, and sons. In short, the role of Chicana *abuelitas*

[grandmothers], mothers, and *tías* [aunts], with very few exceptions, has been to bear children, rear them, and be good wives. (103)

Within this traditional system, males are placed at the center of the family solely by virtue of their gender; sons are therefore more valued than daughters. In order to secure the future of the family, the mother's most important task is to raise the next generation of providers (sons) in order to perpetuate the culture. This system is further entrenched by the history of colonization that persists in Chicana/o cultural memory, propagating the belief that "the more severely we protect the sex roles within the family, the stronger we will be as a unit in opposition to the anglo threat" (Moraga, *Loving* 110). To challenge gender roles within the Chicano family is seen as betrayal of a culture that has historically had to struggle to maintain autonomy in the face of Anglo attempts to "assimilate" or "Americanize" Mexican-Americans. Therefore, women who fail to follow the traditional male-first model are framed as *vendidas*, traitors to their race (103).

In "A Long Line of Vendidas," the most famous essay from *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga explains that one result of the privileging of male family members is Chicanas' betrayals of other women. Describing her relationship with her mother, she states, "This man doesn't have to earn her love. My brother has always come first. Since I've grown up, no woman cares about me for free. There is always a price" (103). This preference of the son over the daughter reinforces from a young age a belief that men are superior, inherently deserving of the Chicana's love without having to earn it. Moraga argues that repetition of the story of Malinche, in emphasizing the idea that women are inherently corrupt and pose a constant danger to the survival of the race, defines racial allegiance through women's willing perpetuation of their own subordination. Because

Malinche's assistance in the destruction of the Aztec people was the result, in popular memory, of her betrayal of her people through her sexual relationship with a white man, proof of the Chicana's loyalty depends on "how ardently she defends her commitment, above all, to the Chicano male" (105)—often at the expense of daughters or sisters.

Yvonne Yarbaro-Bejarano argues that thematically, Moraga's body of work is linked by her discussions of the "intense conflicts involving the cultural values placed on men and Chicanas' continuing betrayal of themselves and other women due to their internalization of men's supposed superiority" (26). In "A Long Line of Vendidas," Moraga interrogates the ways that the historical construction of women as racial traitors, passed down through generations with the Malinche myth, often causes women to instead be traitors to their gender, especially their daughters.

As many feminist historians have noted, assumptions of male superiority and of woman's role as subordinate caregiver also manifested themselves in the Chicano Movement (*El Movimiento*) and the rise of a Chicano Nationalist ideology in the 1960s and 1970s. Incorporating elements of Catholic liberation theology, *el Movimiento* focused on social justice, demanding acknowledgment of Mexican-Americans by US politics and media and opposing racism and discrimination. However, women were discouraged from taking leadership roles in the movement. When they did, they were forced to publicly conform to traditional norms of woman as subordinate by "presenting less active males as their 'visible representatives'" (Saldívar-Hull 29). Despite their leftist aims, male leaders of *el Movimiento* discouraged women from straying from historical models of Mexican womanhood. Ana Castillo recalls that Chicana activists "were asked to emulate the *past* in the role of the *soldaderas* of the Mexican Revolution,

the young women who took up arms and followed their men, carrying a comal [griddle] and molcajete [mortar] in tow to feed the soldiers, as well as providing various other services—sex and picking up an escopeta [shotgun] were not the least of them” (*Massacre* 92). As was not uncommon in progressive movements of the time, women were encouraged to participate “actively” by taking a background role in the revolution that was supposed to provide improved conditions for all, serving as cooks, maids, and sex objects to the men who were the voice of the movement.

Within *el Movimiento*, objections to this gender disparity were criticized as divisive—discussions of sexism were seen only as shifting attention from the real concern of racism. In a 1976 essay called “Sexism in the Movimiento,” originally published in the movement journal *La Gente de Aztlán* [The People of Aztlán], Anna NietoGomez complains that, “Three priorities are constantly emphasized [for Chicana activists]. Support ‘your’ men, maintain traditional roles, and preserve the culture. This is offered as a formula for unity and success within the movement” (99). Chicanas were expected to claim their racial identity first; gender inequality was dismissed as a less pressing concern to be addressed at some unspecified later time when women were not needed in support roles. Alicia Gaspar de Alba reinforces this assessment of *el Movimiento*, finding that, “To be an ‘Adelita’ (or a Loyalist, as was the popular term) a Chicana had to commit herself body and spirit to the race-and-class agenda of the macho leadership” (51). In this way, even as the movement pursued leftist goals of equality and social justice, it perpetuated sexist norms.

As Moraga points out in “A Long Line of Vendidas,” roles of women within *el Movimiento* were policed by the invocation of the Malinche myth, which not only

demanded that women remain in subordinate roles in order to mediate their propensity for sexual betrayal, or be labeled “Malinchistas,” but also excluded lesbians altogether from participation in Chicano activism and from visibility in Chicano culture. As the Malinche myth developed into a story fundamentally about the dangers of female sexuality, Chicana/o culture largely accepted the premise that woman’s betrayal is always a sexual betrayal. Moraga argues that the male fear of women taking control of their own sexuality, apparent in writings like Octavio Paz’s “The Sons of Malinche,” is inextricably tied to the issue of reproduction. She states, “Patriarchal systems of whatever ilk must be able to determine how and when women reproduce. For even ‘after the revolution,’ babies must be made” (*Loving* 109). Control of women’s sexuality and sexual partners ensures the birth and purity of future generations; within this system, then, “even if she’s politically radical, sex remains the bottom line on which [a Chicana] proves her commitment to her race” (105). In refusing sex with the Chicano male and disrupting normative, reproduction-focused sexuality, Chicana lesbians are condemned as the most severe of Malinchistas. Because ideas of female sexuality, as shaped by the myth of Malinche, primarily frame women as passive, “lesbianism can be construed by the race as the Chicana being used by the white man, even if the man never lays a hand on her. *The choice is never seen as her own*” (114). Lesbianism is seen as an insidious white phenomenon, a way to engender the breakdown of the patriarchal family, and with it the breakdown of Chicana/o culture through an interruption of normative sexual roles.

Concurrent with *el Movimiento*, which focused largely on social justice, was the rise of Chicano Nationalism, an ideology centered upon creating a sense of political solidarity through the reclamation of indigenous heritage and ethnic consciousness of

Chicana/os as a race. Nationalist thought questioned whether assimilation into the seemingly irredeemably racist American society was a desirable goal, and as an alternative, promoted a look backwards, a recovery of Aztec and Nahuatl traditions and religious beliefs. An important element of nationalism was the idea of Aztlán, the legendary Aztec homeland situated in what is now part of the United States. Nationalists envisioned Aztlán as a utopian paradise. Colette Morrow states, “The rhetoric of Aztlán played an important role in establishing a Chicano/a national sensibility and fostered Chicano/as’ self-conscious identification of themselves as a ‘people.’ Aztlán supplied Chicano/as a symbolic space in which a communal identity could be forged and answered the need for a sense of unity among Mexican-Americans” (64). However, in “Queer Aztlán,” an essay from Moraga’s 1993 essay and poetry collection *The Last Generation*, Moraga criticizes Chicano Nationalism for “its institutionalized heterosexism, its inbred machismo, and its lack of a cohesive national political strategy” (149). In its place, she imagines a nationalism that “decolonizes the brown and female body as it decolonizes the brown and female earth. It is a new nationalism in which the Chicana Indígena stands at the center, and heterosexism and homophobia are no longer the cultural order of the day” (151). Outlining her own vision of a Queer Aztlán, Moraga demands a reevaluation of the goals and possibilities of Chicano Nationalism.

It is within this context that, like Cisneros, Moraga struggles to understand and maintain a connection with her Mexican and Indian heritage while simultaneously opposing the sexist and heterosexist norms of Chicana/o culture. Rather than reclaiming the myth of Malinche, the sexist implications of which could be seen as already over-inscribed, Moraga turns to the perhaps more flexible story of La Llorona. In her essay

“Looking for the Insatiable Woman,” from the 2001 expanded second edition of *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga rewrites La Llorona’s infanticide as “a retaliation against misogyny, an act of vengeance not against one man, but man in general for a betrayal much graver than sexual infidelity: the enslavement and deformation of our sex” (*Loving 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed* 145). La Llorona becomes a model for Chicanas who are unsatisfied with the static construction of gender roles, a mythic woman from within Chicana/o tradition who refuses to be silenced and instead acts to oppose her own culture’s inequalities. In addition, in La Llorona’s murder of her children Moraga finds a critique of “male-defined Mexican motherhood that robs us of our womanhood” (147). She argues that the myth “reminds Mexican women that, culturally speaking, there is no mother-woman to manifest who is defined by us outside of patriarchy. We have never had the power to do the defining. We wander not in terms of our dead children, but our lost selves, our lost sexuality, our lost spirituality, our lost sabiduría [wisdom]” (147).

In constructing this reading of La Llorona, Moraga links her to two earlier Aztec myths. The Aztec creation myth of the Hungry Woman describes a woman who “cried constantly for food. She had mouths on her wrists, mouths in her elbows, and mouths in her ankles and knees.” In an attempt to comfort her, the spirits “make grass and flowers out of her skin... but just as before, her mouths were everywhere, biting and moaning” (146). Using this story, Moraga portrays Llorona’s wailing as a cry of hunger, born from “a refusal to forget that her half-life [as a woman] is not a natural-born fact” (147), but is imposed upon her by patriarchal society. Moraga also connects La Llorona to the myth of Coatlicue and her children Huitzilopotchli and Coyolxauhqui, in which Coatlicue’s daughter Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess, attempts to kill her mother when she



finds out that Coalicue is pregnant with a son (Huitzilopotchli, the War God). For Moraga, this can be understood as an attempt to stop the beginning of patriarchy that will arise with the birth of the son. Both of these origin myths are woven throughout *The Hungry Woman*.

Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, published after "A Long Line of Vendidas," "Queer Aztlán," and "Looking for the Insatiable Woman," assumes a familiarity with this historical, religious, and cultural context. Set in the future, it imagines a dystopian world in which the dream of Aztlán has been realized, but within the sexist and heterosexist premises of Chicano Nationalism and *El Movimiento*. After the establishment of this new nation, "a counter-revolution followed [in which] hierarchies were established between male and female; and queer folk were unilaterally sent in exile" (*Hungry* 6). As the play starts, it has been seven years since Medea,<sup>6</sup> the La Llorona figure who was originally an active leader in the revolt in which Aztlán seceded from the United States, left her politically powerful husband Jasón for her lesbian lover Luna.<sup>7</sup> In accordance with the laws of Aztlán, Medea, Luna, and Medea and Jasón's son, Chac Mool,<sup>8</sup> were banished to Phoenix, Arizona, now a queer ghetto in-between nations. The action commences when Chac Mool is thirteen years old, as Jasón attempts to convince him to return to Aztlán. *The Hungry Woman* draws on indigenous mythological imagery to frame La Llorona as the lesbian mother searching for a place in a society that

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<sup>6</sup> In naming her protagonist "Medea," Moraga references the wife of Jason from Greek mythology who is the subject of Euripedes' tragic play *Medea*. In this play, Medea kills her children after Jason leaves her for another woman. This intertextuality draws attention to the similarity of myth across cultures—the Greek myth of Medea bears startling resemblance to the Mexican/Chicana story of La Llorona.

<sup>7</sup> "Luna" translates to "Moon," and is likely intended to evoke connections with Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess.

<sup>8</sup> The name "Chac Mool" alludes both to a specific type of statue of a reclining man holding a tray over his stomach, copies of which have been excavated in several Aztec archeological sites and whose significance remains unknown, and to the short story of the same name by Mexican author Carlos Fuentes.

excludes her and to rewrite La Llorona/Medea's murder of her son as a protest against the perpetuation of the normative patriarchal family and the heterosexism of Chicano Nationalism.

With the character of Medea, Moraga uses the La Llorona story to explore the dilemma inherent for a woman raising a son within Chicana/o culture. While in "A Long Line of Vendidas," Moraga speaks as a daughter, criticizing mothers for perpetuating the sexist mentality of the Chicana/o family that privileges sons, with Medea, Moraga takes a more sympathetic view to the impossible position in which the mother is placed. On one hand, as Yvonne Yarbaro-Bejarano states, "In the context of the relationship with the Mexican mother, there is a sense in which becoming the mother of a Mexican son places [a woman] more thoroughly within the 'long line of vendidas' as the woman who betrays other women by accepting the privileges that being the mother of a Mexican man confers" (147). To put the son before all other relationships would, based on Moraga's own framework, make the mother a traitor to her gender. Yet in another sense, given the opportunity to raise a Chicano male, the mother gains access to the possibility of molding her son into a different type of man. Only through her son does the subordinated woman hold potential for change.

This conflict, of course, reinscribes the male at the center of Chicana/o culture, an issue that Moraga emphasizes by specifying that Chac Mool should be played by the only male actor in the cast. Crucial to *The Hungry Woman* is the question of what kind of man Chac Mool will grow up to be, and if through him Medea can change the meaning of masculinity. Being played by the only male actor draws attention to Chac Mool's gender and cues the audience that all other characters are fighting over his masculinity, and with

it the future of the Chicano male. Speaking to a border guard, Chac Mool asks, “Is nobody listening to me?” The guard responds, “We all are. It’s your play. You’re the source of conflict. You’re also the youngest one here, which means you’re the future, it’s gotta be about you. *And* you’re the only real male in the cast” (*Hungry* 76). With this dialogue, Moraga both mocks the assumption that all action must always revolve around the man and draws attention to the weighty responsibility associated with raising a child: shaping the future.

Banished from the racial utopia that she helped create, Medea tries to raise her son outside of the patriarchal system that enforces gender hierarchies and sexual discrimination. As initially characterized, Chac Mool challenges traditional structures of meaning, in part through his ability to understand and interpret the La Llorona story outside of its dominant construction. Asked if he can hear the cries of La Llorona, Chac Mool says, “La Llorona never scared me....I felt sorry for her, not scared....[When I heard her] I felt like she was telling me her side of the story, like I was the only one that heard it like that.” Mama Sal’s response: “Maybe you were” (38). Raised within a queer family, surrounded by the outcasts from Aztlán, Chac Mool represents the rare male who can see beyond the demonization and marginalization of women to hear something new in the stories of the past. Yet as the play progresses, and his father Jasón returns to his life, changes in Chac Mool reflect his shift to a desire to revive the past without interrogating its significance: he gets a tribal tattoo, although he does not know what it means, and embraces indigenous traditions without investigating their origins. Medea fears that if he returns to the influence of his father, Chac Mool will join a patriarchal

society that subordinates women and excludes queers – he will become a man she does not want him to be. Before he leaves, they argue,

CHAC-MOOL: I want to be initiated, Mamá.

MEDEA: Is that what this is all about! Toma [Take it!]. Then start your initiation right here. Cut open your mother's chest first!<sup>9</sup> Dig out her heart with your hands because that's what they'll teach you, to despise a mother's love, a woman's touch...

CHAC-MOOL: I won't do that.

MEDEA: You say that because you're still young. Your manhood, the size of acorns. When you feel yourself grown and hard as oak, you'll forget. (74)

Medea recognizes acceptance of normative Chicano manhood as indoctrination into sexism, and fears that if Chac Mool returns to Aztlán, he will stop being her son and start being a “man,” oppressive and uncaring, unable to see outside the privileged perspective afforded to him solely on the basis of his gender.

In an attempt to maintain influence over Chac Mool's upbringing, Medea sacrifices herself, abandoning Luna, her lover of seven years, in an attempt to reconcile with her husband Jasón. Yarbrow-Bejarano states that, “Since cultural constructions define ‘mother’ and ‘lesbian’ as mutually exclusive categories, there is no one for [Medea] to be as both” (131). Forced to make the choice between being a mother and fulfilling her own sexual desires, Medea feels she must choose the former. To call this a choice is, of course, debatable, considering that societal messages frame these two options in opposition: to be a mother is to be a real woman, to be a lesbian is to be a traitor, hardly a

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<sup>9</sup> This suggestion of sacrifice of the mother through cutting out her heart may reference the now largely dismissed suggestion by some anthropologists that the tray held by the Chac Mool statue was originally used in Aztec tribes for heart sacrifice.

Chicana at all. As Medea's mother Mama Sal tells Luna, "When you're a girl, hija, and a Mexican, you only get one shot at being a woman and that's being a mother.... You go from daughter to mother, and there's nothing in-between. That's the law of our people written como los diez [like the ten] commandments on the metate stone from the beginning of all time" (*Hungry* 50). In Medea's denial of her lesbianism and attempt to return to Jasón with Chac Mool, we see the enactment of the long line of vendidas. She sees her son as the future, and must protect him at all costs. Indeed, Chac Mool is her legacy—only through her son does she have access to the power to change the dominant social structure. However, in symbolically killing a part of herself, that of the lesbian lover (Marrero 143), she perpetuates a system which privileges the futures of men over the lives and relationships of women.

Despite her efforts to raise him differently, Medea fears she cannot stop her son from moving toward the predetermined path laid out for him by virtue of his gender. She states, "He refuses my gifts and turns to my enemies to make a man out of him. I cannot relinquish my son to them, to walk ese camino triste [this sad road] where they will call him by his manly name and he goes deaf to hear it" (88). In an attempt to halt this outcome, Medea poisons Chac Mool, reenacting La Llorona's murder of her children. Harry Elam argues, "The murder functions as a gesture of symbolic resistance against the tyranny of a national symbolic order that not only restricts the roles that women or people of color may play, but also preordains the place of progress and how one's offspring can even function within this system" (118). As a woman, Medea has the agency to change society or to stop the sexism and heterosexism of Aztlán only by preventing the future altogether through the murder of her son. We are told at the beginning of the play that

Medea is a former activist, and once fought for positive change in the world through the establishment of Aztlán. However, she found that as a woman, she lacked the power within society to enact a broader social restructuring; she complains, “Men think women have no love of country, that the desire for nation is a male prerogative. So like gods, they pick and choose who is to live and die in a land that I bled for equal to any man. Aztlán, how you betrayed me!” (*Hungry* 15). As a woman, Medea sees no way to reshape the system without destroying it altogether.

Some feminist historians have read La Llorona’s murder of her children as an attempt to save them from the Spanish conquest. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, for example, interprets the infanticide committed by La Llorona “as a political act of resistance by mestizo indigenous women... [La Llorona] drowns her children rather than submit them to the slavery of the conquest. The infanticide is not an act by an ‘insane’ or insanely jealous woman; rather, it is a rational, political act of opposition against the Spanish colonizers” (121). By pairing her rewriting with critiques of nationalism and the sexism and heterosexism of race-based movements, however, Moraga establishes that it is not only outsiders that colonize; her Medea/La Llorona kills to protect her son from more than conquest by the Spanish. As Elam asserts, “Medea’s act saves Chac Mool from returning to a politically segregated and ideologically bankrupt Aztlán. She prevents him from carrying on traditions of patriarchal oppression...La Llorona symbolizes the loneliness and agony of the disparaging mother, a woman without agency in a patriarchal society” (127). Through *The Hungry Woman*, Moraga exposes the hypocrisies in nationalism, asking what it means to create a utopia that oppresses certain segments of

the population, and protests the process through which Chicano nationalists create hierarchies and draw lines of inclusion.

As Medea searches for options, she turns to the past and discovers that this story has been enacted many times before. *The Hungry Woman* is narrated by the Cihuatateo, a “chorus of four warrior women who, according to Aztec myth, have died in childbirth” (8). These women portray all of the play’s supporting roles, including male characters such as Medea’s husband Jasón. The constant presence of the Cihuatateo ties the story of La Llorona to an Aztec tradition in which childbirth was acknowledged as a form of battle. Like participation in war, the Aztecs saw childbirth as risking one’s own life for the good of the people. The chorus serves as a constant reminder of motherhood as sacrifice, and raises the question of whether it is perhaps an even greater sacrifice to be a mother in the present world than to die before having to face the dilemmas that Medea does. As she prepares the herbs with which she will kill Chac Mool, Medea cries, “I would have preferred to die a warrior woman / like the Cihuatateo / women who die in childbirth / offering their own lives / to the birthing of others. / How much simpler things would have been. / But what life do I have to offer my son now?” (88). In killing her son, Medea also kills a part of herself; Medea-as-mother is offered up as a sacrifice to prevent Chac Mool from being lost to normative manhood.

The death of Chac Mool also serves as a reenactment of the story of the siblings Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopotchli; with his murder, Medea attempts to halt the patriarchal society which came into being with the God of War. As she builds an altar to her dead son, she shouts, “What crime do I commit now, Mamá? / To choose the daughter over the son? / You betrayed us, Madre Coatlicue. / You anciana, you who birthed the

God of War. / ... / Coyolxauhqui, diosa de la luna [goddess of the moon]. / Ahora [now], she is my god. / La Luna, la hija rebelde [the rebel daughter]. Te rechazo, Madre [I reject you, mother]” (91). Medea’s act of violence is a refusal to stand by as cycles of inequality and injustice are perpetuated; this speech demonstrates a return to alignment with the woman, the daughter.

In addition, Moraga employs the myth of the Hungry Woman to discuss the suppression of female sexuality, and specifically lesbian desire. At one point in the play, Luna steps out of the action to recite the story of the Hungry Woman at the same time as it is implied that she and Medea are having sex. A stage direction reads, “Luna makes love to Medea with her mouth,” and immediately following this direction, there is a lighting transition and Luna steps out of the scene to deliver the myth of the Hungry Woman as a monologue. Once she has finished reciting the story, another stage direction tells us that it is now “After sex” (44-5). The stage directions here imply that, in itself, Luna’s recitation of the myth to Medea produces an essentially sexual gratification. Unlike typical discussions of female sexuality within Chicana/o culture, which silence female desires and deny any mention of lesbian sexuality, the myth of the Hungry Woman is one of the few stories that acknowledges that women have needs and hungers that heteronormative society cannot satiate. With this scene, Moraga suggests that perhaps what the insatiable woman is searching for is the freedom to love other women, and the escape from a society that forces women to be ashamed of their desires. Through references to the Hungry Woman, who Moraga sees as one incarnation of La Llorona, the play raises the questions: what are women hungry for? And what do they have to do to achieve it within the patriarchal society that confines them? The fact that Medea must



sacrifice the satisfaction of her sexual relationship with Luna for her son's future reminds us that female sexuality and desires are consistently subordinated or condemned within a male-centered society. As long as this is so, women will always be hungry.

By choosing to discuss these issues from within the context of Aztec religious traditions, Moraga accomplishes two things. First, she establishes that her themes have persisted over time—if a culture continually tells stories of matricide, there must be a reason. Second, throughout *The Hungry Woman*, Moraga uses myth to establish a sense of the continuity between the contemporary Chicana and her indigenous heritage. Yet in retaliation against the male-focused, and often sexist, Aztec iconography recovered by Chicano nationalism, she focuses on stories that reclaim and give voice to the women of the past. Lourdes Torres argues that throughout her work, “Moraga affirms what she values most about her culture, for example the closeness of the women and the stories and the myths with which she grew up. Yet she does not idealize these aspects; she acknowledges their limitations and works to transform them” (281). At one point in *The Hungry Woman*, Luna is arrested for breaking into a museum in Aztlán and attempting to steal ancient figurines of goddesses. When asked by the border guard why she did this, she replies, “I wanted to free my little sisters, trapped by history.... I wanted to hold them in my hands and feel what they had to teach me about their maker” (60). In a sense, this statement encapsulates Moraga's project in *The Hungry Woman*—to free mythic images of women from their male-defined meanings and to hear what their stories have to say about being Chicana.

**Chapter Three: Female Iconography, the Catholic Church, and the Process of Mythologizing in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God***

Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* has been described by Sandra Cisneros as a Chicana *telenovela*, blending magical realism, satire, mythology, religion, and environmental criticism with interludes of traditional recipes and medicine. The novel follows a fairly linear storyline, chronicling the lives and ultimate martyrdom of four sisters, Esperanza (Hope), Caridad (Charity), Fe (Faith), and La Loca (The Crazy One), and their mother, Sofia, in Tome, New Mexico. Throughout the novel, Castillo also engages with issues of oppression, critiquing social institutions and dominant ideologies. For this reason, *So Far From God*, like the work of Cisneros and Moraga, falls firmly in the realm of what Ralph Rodriguez calls “contestatory literature,” which “employs varying narrative strategies to critique, resist, and oppose racism, sexism, homophobia, and/or classism” (67). Castillo's incorporation of myth and spirituality into the text serves as a call for social justice and as a critique of the mechanisms that reproduce sexual and racial oppression.

In her collection of essays, *Massacre of the Dreamers* (1994), Castillo states that Chicanas “have been forced to believe that we, as women, only existed to serve man under the guise of serving a Father God. Furthermore, our spirituality has been thoroughly subverted by institutionalized religious customs. The key to that spiritual oppression has been the repression of our sexuality, primarily through the control of our reproductive ability and bodies” (13). Critiques of these practices—oppression of women by the Catholic Church, destruction of indigenous spiritual traditions, and the suppression of female sexuality—underscore much of *So Far From God*. Castillo draws on myth and religion, the very traditions which she sees as often harming women, to create a new

paradigm through which to understand gender, race, and sexuality as a Chicana.

Although Castillo engages with the figures of La Llorona and La Virgen de Guadalupe, her main focus is on interrogating the process through which women are mythologized, rather than rewriting specific figures. *So Far From God* indicts the Catholic Church for advancing a limited view of womanhood through myth and icons and, through the character of Caridad, creates a new type of saint who incorporates indigenous traditions and an acceptance of female sexuality.

Throughout the text, Castillo implicates the Catholic Church as a factor in the replication of social problems within Chicana/o culture. The role of Catholicism in Mexico and the Southwestern United States has historically been that of the colonizer, and as a result the relationship of contemporary Chicanas to the religion is a complicated one. After the Spanish Conquest, the Catholic Church instituted itself as the only acceptable religion, forbidding worship or even mention of indigenous gods; many precontact traditions remain suppressed. Yet although Catholicism was initially brought to Mexico by Spanish colonizers, the religion has been so effectively integrated into Mexican culture that for contemporary Chicanas/os, Catholicism has become an important way to remain linked to their Mexican heritage. Castillo states that, “the Mexican woman, in terms of both pre-Hispanic culture and afterwards, is defined by society in a very religious way. I could not extract one from the other” (Mulligan 20). This point is also made by psychologist Aida Hurdado; in her study of the attitudes and beliefs of young Chicanas, approximately two-thirds of the women she interviewed were raised Catholic (104); many of these women “saw participation in religion not only as spiritual practice but also as cultural expression. They valued rituals in the Catholic

Church that made use of Spanish” (105) and “saw Catholic religious practices as a way to connect with other Latinos” (111).

Many Chicana feminists accuse the Catholic Church of being fundamentally colonialist, maintaining its power only through the subordination of women and people of color. In literature distributed during the Chicano Movement in 1971, Sister Theresita Basso accuses, “our Mexican-American community has been exploited over the centuries by the established community and has been treated in a paternalistic manner by the church” (62). In 1977, student leader Sonia A. López writes, “Religious institutions and Christian ideology, with its tales of Adam and Eve, the Virgin Mary and reference to sex roles in the Bible, have served to maintain and perpetuate women's inferior position. The Catholic Church, in particular, has been influential in cultivating this aspect of the Mexican culture and accordingly has relegated women to an inferior status” (103). Castillo's critiques of the Church follow from this tradition as she states, “The subordination of women's sexuality was crucial for the survival of patriarchal religious practices....The Virgin Mary is not an example of inherent femaleness or womanhood but an invented concept of the Church leaders to dictate social and political policies” (*Massacre* 107). Castillo emphasizes that the church and its icons, often taken for granted as serving exclusively spiritual purposes, advance political agendas as well. Because the foundational myths of the Catholic Church were created for the political purpose of keeping a specific group in power (106), the Church's leadership is invested in the canonization and perpetuation of such mythology in order to continue to regulate behavior.

In *So Far From God*, Castillo focuses on this process of mythologizing women as a means through which women are oppressed, accepted within the Catholic tradition only as virgin, mother, or untouchable saint. Critics Silvio Sirias and Richard McGarry argue that, “Castillo’s authorial stance makes it evident that the Church’s strong patriarchal posture and its binary philosophical system alienate Hispanic American women. Castillo’s characters seek inclusion, freedom of action, and freedom of thought within the Catholic Church. Yet, what they find in *So Far From God* is the condemnation of their humanity rather than its exaltation” (94). From the outset, Castillo frames the text in the context of Christian mythology by naming four of the five main female characters after Christian martyrs. Then, through the character of Francisco de Penitente and the organization “Mothers of Martyrs and Saints” (M.O.M.A.S.), the subject of the satirical epilogue, Castillo outlines her main complaints regarding the structure and ideology of the Church.

Stories of Sophia (Wisdom) and her three daughters, Faith, Hope, and Charity date back to the second century (Rodriguez 71). In the Catholic tradition, Faith, Hope and Charity are virgin martyrs, tortured and killed in Rome for refusing to bow to a statue of Artemis. As a reward for remaining faithful to Jesus Christ even to the point of sacrificing her daughters, their mother, Saint Sophia, was brought to heaven by God to join them (Murphy). Alluding to this story through the names of Sofia, Esperanza, Caridad, and Fe serves two functions: first, using names which evoke both virtues and female martyrs calls attention to the trope within the Catholic tradition of proper female behavior as martyrdom, that is, passive acceptance of suffering for the greater good. Colette Morrow suggests that in the Catholic tradition, narratives of venerated women are

used to teach that to bear suffering silently, especially in the case of motherhood, is both redemptive and “a manifestation of virtue” (72). In addition, naming the daughters after Christian ideals frames them as archetypes rather than individuals. Because they are characterized from the outset as sites of cultural meaning, the refusal of these characters to conform to stereotypical female behavior takes on larger implications, demonstrating “the choice of whether to pass on the traditions or break the hold that these have over them” (Siras and McGarry 95).

The character of Francisco de Penitente functions as a critique of religious fanaticism and of the ways in which the Catholic Church perpetuates and even encourages the male gaze. In itself, his name is significant: in Catholic tradition, a penitent is one who repents for wrongdoings. It would seem a fitting name for a character who within the text is guilty of stalking, an implied rape, and driving two other characters to suicide, except that Francisco takes on this name *before* any of these events. We are told that Francisco began to be called “the Penitent” at the age of thirty-three, when, after a stint in Vietnam, he took on the profession of *santero*, one who makes images of saints (God 95). Francisco is therefore presented from his first appearance in the text as a holy man, one who has repented and devoted his life to the iconography of the Catholic Church; all of his actions that follow must be seen in the context that he professes to be and sees himself as a man of God. In addition, the chapter in which Francisco is first introduced is entitled, “An Interlude: On Francisco el Penitente’s First Becoming a Santero *and Thereby Sealing His Fate*” (94, italics mine). The act of becoming wholly invested in the iconography of the Catholic Church is here directly implicated as a cause of the atrocities Francisco will later commit.

Francisco also reduces women to symbols in his personal interactions. Feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir argues, “Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not defined as an autonomous being” (13). The roles of mother and virgin both construct their relevance around male needs or desires: woman is either nurturer or untouched sexual object to be conquered. From a young age, Francisco views women in these terms. After his mother’s death when he is young, “as the years went on his mother ever ascending toward heaven became more remote as a former human being and more akin to a celestial entity. To Francisco, yes, his mother was no less than a saint” (98). This image of the sanctified mother is available to Francisco because mother is one of the two acceptable roles within the Catholic tradition; in absence of a living mother it is easy to convert her to sainthood. The reduction of woman to iconic figure continues when Francisco sees Caridad and “looked upon her as one looks upon Mary. In Francisco’s eyes, Caridad had proven herself to be all that was chaste and humble” (192). His worship of her results from his belief that she fulfills the iconic role of the passive virgin. While the irony of this misconception will be discussed later in this chapter, the snide comments of the narrator also serve to frame Francisco’s obsession with Caridad as a fetishization, the result of false vision.

Even the first time he saw her he was taken aback by the glow her body emanated. Despite the beating of the sun on his brow and the cross that bent his bare back that Good Friday he knew that it was not delirium. One less faithful might have dismissed what he saw as a mirage caused by the pain he has chosen to endure emulating the passion of the Christ. But Francisco de Penitente knew what he saw in Caridad was nothing short of a blessing. (192)

The narrator implies here that the glow *was* the result of Francisco's delirium, and his fanatical religious beliefs have literally clouded his vision. Francisco's idealization of Caridad proves fatal when Francisco discovers Caridad's involvement in a lesbian relationship. Unable to cope with Caridad's failure to conform to the image of the ideal female saint, he stalks her and her lover until they jump off of a cliff. Since childhood, Francisco has viewed his mother as icon—only a memory, she never fails to meet the terms of his sanctification of her. In this context, Caridad's refusal to conform to Francisco's image of her seems unimaginable.

Through the character of Francisco, Castillo also implicates the male-dominated structure of divinity in Catholic tradition. The New Mexican *santero*, described as typically male and "given to solitude" (96), is understood as a divine vessel. Castillo states that, "The santero, in and of himself, had no divine power, except when he was preparing a bulto, a wooden sculpture of a saint. His expert hand was not guided by the aesthetic objectives of artists, but by the saint himself in heaven, as permitted by God" (96). Such a profession, in which the artist possesses a direct link to God, places the (male) artist in a privileged position in relation to divinity. This follows a tradition in which men are always closer to God than women, a position reinforced through the Christian Bible.<sup>10</sup> In addition, in the Christian tradition, God is male. Male authority, and in fact the entire structure of Western society, depends on this gendered power dichotomy; in *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo reminds us that the creation of myth and religion "was dependent on the needs of those men in power" (106). In such a system, only men can hold the positions of divinely-given authority (such as santero); as

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<sup>10</sup> For example: "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law" (1 Corinthians 14:34).



the subordinate gender, women are typically denied the agency to meaningfully influence their society. When Francisco becomes obsessed with Caridad, an obsession which ultimately leads to her death, we are told that his Aunt Loretta “knew darn well what he was up to. But what could she say? She had married into that family more than a quarter of a century before and knew well enough it would do no good to laugh nor cry about what she saw the men in her husband’s family do in the name of God” (*God* 191). As Francisco becomes convinced that he has a privileged position in relation to the divine, he begins to use religion to justify his behavior. We are told that when “Francisco felt himself powerless to his desire... he nonetheless tried to justify it by equating it with his spiritual calling” (198). The structure of the Catholic Church fosters a gendered hierarchy which can be employed by a religious fanatic such as Francisco to not only explain, but also make holy, his sexist and heterosexist behavior. He is “a zealot who will go to any length to protect male dominance in our society” (Sirias and McGarry 91).

However, even as Castillo invokes the narrative of patriarchal Catholicism, upheld by iconic images of women, she undercuts it. First, the narrator uses a consistently mocking or disdainful tone towards Francisco, as when noting that Francisco's religious calling is an example of “the crooked line of God” (*God* 95) because he is only the seventh son of a first son, or in the references to him as “pobre [poor] Franky” (193). In addition, Francisco’s suicide (a mortal sin in Catholic tradition) clearly marks his death, and by extension his life, as fundamentally unholy. In its final image, his death is presented not as martyrdom, but portrayed almost comically; he was found “dangling sorrowful-like like a crow-picked pear from a tall piñon, which was how someone had first put it and how it was remembered after that” (212).

Many of the same critiques of the Catholic Church made through the character of Francisco de Penitente are echoed in the final chapter, in which, after the death of her four daughters, Sofia founds an organization called “Mothers of Martyrs and Saints” (M.O.M.A.S.). This organization, “known worldwide as very prestigious (if not a little elitist)” (247), accepts members through application—only mothers of certified martyrs and saints are admitted—and is run by a board whose “appointments were for life, like judges” (247). This chapter, in which the narrator comments most frequently on the events described, satirizes the commodification of images of women and the structures of power within the Catholic Church.

The description of M.O.M.A.S. emphasizes its increasing commercialization. Although the organization is ostensibly a religious one, we are told that, “Every year the number of vendors of basically more useless products and souvenirs than what a tourist could find on a given day at Disney World grew” (249). This interlinking of religion and capitalism follows the Marxist premise that ideological systems exist to uphold economic systems. Marxist theory argues that “the ruling ideas of an epoch [such as religion] are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas” (Williams 127). In the context of M.O.M.A.S., one of the key processes involved in making these products profitable is the transformation of stories of women into acceptable myth. Once this occurs, women’s images can be commodified as icons for purchase. La Loca, the youngest daughter of Sofia, is characterized throughout the novel by her refusal to touch other people. Citizens of the town of Tome consider her extremely strange and largely ignore her. However, upon her death, La Loca’s image, which does not conform to typical stories of female

saints and martyrs, adopts a generic and harmless overlay that avoids any serious disruption of norms. Despite the fact that “people never really could figure out what La Loca protected and oversaw as a rule... it was considered a good idea to have a little statue of La Loca in your kitchen and to give one as a good luck gift to new brides and progressive grooms” (*God* 248). Although in life La Loca had no significant connection to the kitchen, and never engaged in any relationships with men, after her death her myth is made to fit into traditional female stereotypes—cooking and marriage—a story mobilized through physical icons and their sale. Furthermore, the sanctification of La Loca, who in life explicitly avoided involvement in the Catholic Church, “flat out refus[ing]” (221) the sacraments, can be read as the Catholic Church claiming her subjectivity despite her objections.

In addition, the organizational structure of M.O.M.A.S. illuminates the cyclical nature of hegemony, and the difficulty of escaping from a system which concentrates power in few hands. As the founder of M.O.M.A.S., Sofia possesses none of the characteristics that normally connote power in the institution of the Catholic Church; for one, she is not male, and therefore cannot be a bishop or priest. However, Castillo suggests that the idea of hierarchical power is so ingrained in Catholic ideology that even Sofia cannot imagine a new system. Sofia and the other members of M.O.M.A.S. attain authority through the only socially sanctioned mode of female power, motherhood, refusing to accede that power to those who do not conform to their standards. Sirias and McGarry argue that M.O.M.A.S. is intended to represent a “purely matriarchal” organization which “counterbalances Francisco de Penitente’s fanatical devotion to Catholicism and its patriarchal structure” (94), but I believe this is a misreading of the

tone of the chapter. The inequality inherent in M.O.M.A.S is emphasized by the narrator's *denial* of it—the title of the chapter states, "...And a Rumor Regarding the Inevitability of Double Standards Is (We Hope) Dispensed With" (*God* 246). The parentheses here call into question the overt message stated by the narrator. The repeated mention of rumors of "discrimination against men" (247) or "closed attendance" at conventions (250), despite immediate justification by the narrator, continue to suggest that this organization is not as egalitarian as it purports to be. Like the Catholic Church itself, M.O.M.A.S. has gained enough power to create its own mythology and deny its own exclusionary practices. After dispelling the rumor that M.O.M.A.S. "checks" to make sure all of its members have wombs, the final paragraph explicitly questions the inevitability of cyclicity: "After all, just because there had been a time way back when, when some fregados all full of themselves went out of their way to prove that none among them had the potential of being a mother, did it mean that there *had* to come a time when someone would be made to *prove* that she did?" (252). With this question, Castillo implies that simple reversals of power dichotomies are not enough to destroy an oppressive system.

It is for this reason that Castillo does not make her project the direct rewriting of myth, as does Cisneros, or the reclaiming of myth, as does Moraga. Given a system whose iconic images of women are ultimately damaging, Castillo's refusal to engage with those images by rewriting them suggests a demand for an entirely new understanding of the archetypal Chicana. However, she does not entirely dismiss the method of resistance used by authors like Cisneros, in which the authors rewrite problematic mythological figures in order to reinscribe them with narratives of female strength. Castillo's rewriting

of the Llorona myth, in a minor subplot in which La Loca meets La Llorona, can be read as an acknowledgment of the prominence of this method of resistance. In this brief section, La Llorona, as a result of her eternal wandering, is reimagined as a connection between Chicanas in all parts of the world, the “Chicana astral traveler” (*God* 162). After her death overseas, the oldest sister, Esperanza, chooses La Llorona to bring the news of her fate back to her family, because “to Esperanza’s spirit-mind, La Llorona in the beginning (before men got in the way of it all) may have been nothing short of a loving mother goddess” (163). But even in this fairly straightforward reversal (failed mother to loving mother), Castillo challenges the wisdom of passing on these myths in any form. After outlining the Mexican roots of La Llorona, the narrator states that Sofia, finding this story irrelevant to her own lived experience as an abandoned mother, “refused to repeat this nightmare to her daughters” (161).

The character of Caridad extends Castillo’s critique of Catholic female saints beyond a rewriting of specific mythic figures, instead deconstructing the way meaning is made within the system as a whole. Caridad represents a new type of saint, one who refuses the virgin/whore binary and the idea of female passivity as an ideal, legitimizes lesbian sexuality, and incorporates indigenous religions. Over the course of *So Far From God*, the community of Tome views Caridad first as whore, then as virginal saint. After betrayal by her husband Memo, who cheats on her after two weeks of marriage and then, after the annulment, gets her pregnant three times, Caridad falls into a pattern of promiscuity. “Three abortions later and with her weakness for shots of Royal Crown with beer chasers after work... Caridad no longer discriminated between giving her love to Memo and only to Memo whenever he wanted it and loving anyone she met at the bars

who vaguely resembled Memo” (27). The sexual passivity implied by the use of the word “giving” to describe Caridad’s promiscuity evokes the tradition of Malinche, a connection reinforced by the community’s reaction when Caridad is ultimately raped. “There are still those for whom there is no kindness for a young woman who has enjoyed life, so to speak. Among them were the sheriff’s deputies and the local police department; therefore Caridad’s attacker or attackers were never found” (33). In the tradition of Malinche, the violated mother, expressions of female sexuality are considered to invite violation; therefore there is no surprise or indignance at violence towards an overtly sexual woman. In addition, the mention of the three abortions paints Caridad as a failed mother, aligning her with La Llorona.

However, after her rape, Caridad is reborn as a holy figure, described as emanating a glow (192) and characterized as a “handmaiden of Christ” (87). During Holy Week, “hundreds of people made their way up the mountain to la Caridad’s cave in hopes of obtaining her blessing” (87). Given that Holy Week processions usually progress from chapels or churches to a main cathedral, the fact that the cave in which Caridad lives is the destination of such a procession marks her body as a major religious center. These details serve to realign Caridad with Catholic saints, in particular La Virgen de Guadalupe. By conflating oppositional mythic figures into Caridad, Castillo exposes as arbitrary what she calls “the Christian principle of duality: life is divided into opposites. You are either good, doing good, represent the good, or you are bad” (*Massacre* 90). By making her new saint both good and bad, Castillo dismisses those categorizations as insufficient as ways of understanding human behavior.

Even as Caridad is presented as a saint, she reverses the behaviors which qualify women for sainthood—in particular, passivity. After retreating to a cave in the mountains for a year, Caridad is discovered by three men, including Francisco de Penitente. When they attempt to force her to return with them, she refuses to comply. “She resisted and let herself drop to the ground. He bent down to take her up in his arms, figuring she would be even easier to get on the horse without any resistance but he couldn’t lift her” (*God* 87). Although this initial resistance is on some level a passive one, as the story spreads Caridad's resistance takes on an element of active refusal and strength. “It was said that she lifted the very horse in the air that the hermano had tried to force her to mount” (88). This refusal to submit to male authority is the miracle that causes Caridad to be deemed saintly, in a reversal of the typical model for female saints, who are often thus classified for their silent suffering. Colette Morrow argues that, “Caridad’s refusal to obey the men radically revises the model of female obedience and submission to patriarchal authority personified in the female saints and virgins who populate Roman and Mexican Catholic apparitional narratives. Caridad resists the men rather than surrendering to them and is miraculously strengthened by it” (75). Caridad’s disobedience to male authority is precisely the quality that proves her holiness.

In crafting a new female archetype, Castillo also challenges the heterosexism of Chicana/o culture. Like Moraga, Castillo recognizes that lesbianism is typically either demonized or ignored in Chicana/o society. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo goes so far as to state that, “A [Chicana] lover of women has no role models in the past” (132).<sup>11</sup> Through the character of Caridad, Castillo imagines a new archetypal myth that

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<sup>11</sup> This assertion could be challenged by the figure of Catalina de Erauso, a fifteenth century Spanish woman who dressed and lived as a man, and whose romantic relationships were exclusively with

legitimizes lesbian sexuality as not only acceptable, but sanctifying (Morrow 73). When Caridad first sees Esmerelda, the woman with whom she eventually falls in love, it is from a distance: “Woman-on-the-wall was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen—but she had scarcely more than a glimpse of her” (*God* 79). The sight of Esmerelda completely overwhelms Caridad, and she can think of nothing else. Descriptions of the encounter “frame Caridad’s feelings for the beautiful lesbian in the conventions of Roman and Mexican Catholic apparitional narratives relating encounters with a divine or sanctified figure, often the Virgin Mary” (Morrow 71). Within a tradition that largely ignores the existence of lesbian desire, mirroring this encounter to appearances of the Virgin Mary challenges assumptions about the privileged position of heterosexuality in relation to holiness. Caridad’s veneration of Esmerelda differs from her own iconization by Francisco because of their respective reactions. While Francisco identifies Caridad as a saint and then attempts to possess her, when Caridad sees a woman who she believes to be a saint she retreats to a cave in the mountains for a year of meditation, internalizing this spiritual experience for the purpose of self-reflection. As in the traditions of some Mesoamerican tribes, including the Nahuatl, the cave here represents a sacred space, a place of enlightenment, healing, and transmission of knowledge (Otegui and Torres). Her year in the cave, the direct result of the vision of Esmerelda, enables Caridad both to display resistance to patriarchal culture and to become identified as a saint; lesbian desire is the catalyst for the change in her character.

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women. By the time she was discovered, de Erauso was sufficiently famous as a soldier that she gained special dispensation from the Pope to continue to publicly dress as a man; she migrated to New Spain in 1645, where she died. Her story continues to be retold in Spanish and American literature and film. See: Velasco, Sherry M., *The Lieutenant Nun: Transgenderism, Lesbian Desire, and Catalina de Erauso*.



The role of indigenous spirituality is also central to the construction of Caridad as a new female. According to Castillo, the revival of forgotten spirituality is integral to Chicana political consciousness; she states, “Chicana is a political term... and part of that is indeed rescuing traditions that our mothers cast aside, that this [United States] culture rejects” (Mulligan 22). While recovering from her rape, Caridad becomes a *curandera*, a healer who practices folk medicine, abandoning the institution of the Catholic Church for an earth-based spirituality. After this, “Caridad never went to Mass; instead, a new student of yoga, she rose with a salute to the sun” (*God* 65). At this point, Caridad’s spirituality is not mediated by an institution; it is an individual process of finding meaning which incorporates the natural world. Some of this meaning does include elements of the Catholic tradition, as when on “Sundays she cleaned her altar, dusting the statues and pictures of saints she prayed to and the framed photos of her loved ones” (63); however, there is the sense that Caridad has taken from Catholicism only the elements that hold relevance for her. The Catholic saints to whom she prays hold no more importance than photos of loved ones or the sun-based rituals rooted in Aztec and Nahua traditions.

The myth of Caridad culminates when Caridad and Esmerelda visit Esmerelda’s family at Acoma Pueblo, a Native American town in New Mexico built on a 367 foot tall mesa with sheer cliff sides that is considered the oldest continually inhabited town in the United States. Francisco de Penitente, having discovered their relationship, follows them there, and upon seeing him, Esmerelda and Caridad run off the edge of the cliff. Castillo describes this act not as a suicide, but as a return to the feminine earth:

*Tsichtinako was calling!... The Acoma people heard it and knew it was the voice*

of the Invisible One who had nourished the first two humans, who were also both female, although no one had heard it in a long time and some had never heard it before. But all still knew who It was... Much to all of their surprise, there were no morbid remains of splinted bodies tossed to the ground, down, down, like bad pottery or glass or old bread. There weren't even whole bodies lying peaceful. There was nothing. Just the spirit deity Tsichtinako calling loudly with a voice like the wind, guiding the two women back, not out toward the sun's rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist, dark earth. (211)

In the Acoma creation myth, Tsichtinako (Thought-Woman) is the female spirit creator of the Earth. By linking Caridad's death to this myth, Castillo refuses the Catholic mythology of a male creator God, and reinstitutes the source of spirituality in the earth, rather than a distant heaven. Caridad's death is not one of a martyr who suffers for a paternalistic God; instead, it marks a return to a spirituality based on unity with the earth, with other women, and with her indigenous heritage.

In *So Far From God*, Castillo creates, in Caridad, a new female archetype incorporating indigenous traditions, lesbian sexuality, and a refusal of binary divisions. This creation of new myth is twinned with the implication that the process through which women are mythologized in the Catholic Church is one which perpetuates systems of oppression. In this way, Castillo does not deny the importance of spirituality, but instead understands spirituality in an entirely new way that embraces a variety of traditions, emphasizing harmony and personal fulfillment rather than reinscribing a patriarchal hegemonic system. In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo states "Even as we select from our Mexica (Nahua) and Christian traditions, it is only we today, who can ultimately

define what is needed to give us courage... Even when selectively incorporating what seems indispensable to our religiosity, we must analyze its historical meaning. We must, if necessary give it new meaning, so that it validates our instincts to survive on our own terms” (145). It is this project that she undertakes in *So Far From God*—finding the institution and mythology of the Catholic Church insufficient in meeting her spiritual needs, Castillo creates new myth in its place.

**Chapter Four: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* and the Use of Myth in the Development of *Mestiza* Consciousness**

A coeditor of *This Bridge Called My Back*, one of the classic texts of third world feminism, Gloria Anzaldúa is perhaps one of the most well-known of the Chicana feminist theorists, frequently referenced within feminist theory and queer theory for her ideas on the fluidity and intersectionality of identity. Other Chicana authors often cite *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), her collection of essays and poetry conceptualizing the Chicana's constantly shifting existence between two cultures, for significantly impacting their understanding of themselves and their cultures. Ana Castillo states that "for readers, *Borderlands* is a blood curdling scream in the night" that speaks to the Chicana self that has been silenced (*Massacre* 172), while Sandra Cisneros lists the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa as one of the factors that led her to a new understanding of how to balance her own identity with her Chicana heritage ("Goddess" 50). Cherríe Moraga also holds a close relationship with Anzaldúa's work, dedicating "A Long Line of Vendidas" "para [for] Gloria Anzaldúa, in gratitude" (*Loving* 90). With its exploration of the shifting meaning of border spaces, *Borderlands/La Frontera* provides a framework that guides Cisneros, Moraga, and Castillo in their rewritings of mythological figures. Through her understanding of fragmentation and multiplicity, Anzaldúa combines projects we have seen in these three authors' writings: the deconstruction and resignification of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe and the use of these figures to critique elements of Chicana/o culture. Finally, looking to the historical antecedents to these figures, Anzaldúa reclaims the goddess Coatlicue as her personal connection to a Chicana identity existing outside of societal mandates and allows her to embrace all of its apparently contradictory elements.

As Anzaldúa understands it, the concept of the borderlands describes a place that is in-between, a liminal space. Because of the constant collision between two cultures, identity in the borderlands is shifting, unresolvable, fluid, and transitory. Anzaldúa refers to the border between the U.S. and Mexico as

*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging together to form a third country—a border culture.... A

borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (3)

For a Chicana, interactions with the conditions of the borderlands are constant, and present themselves both externally, shaping Chicana/o culture as a whole, and internally, shaping the individual's understanding of herself. A new "*mestiza* consciousness" develops, Anzaldúa argues, as a result of negotiating the often contradictory messages of Anglo and Mexican cultures and making the choice to define oneself neither by or strictly against the norms of either. Instead, *mestiza* consciousness thrives in the refusal to settle in one culture or another; it is marked by a realization that it is impossible to "hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries" and "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (79). Demanding fluidity, the uncertainty of the borderlands holds possibilities for the construction of a new way of thinking, a "continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm... a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking" (80) after which the *mestiza* is able to "reinterpret history, and, using new symbols, shape new myths" (82). As we have seen, Cisneros, Moraga, and Castillo all undertake this project, deconstructing the accepted meanings of mythological

figures and, in their place, creating new or adapted mythologies which speak more truthfully to the experience of the borderlands.

Like these three authors, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa investigates the origins of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe in order to extend their meanings beyond what has been defined by a dominant patriarchal society. She destroys the oppositional divisions between these three figures, breaking down their accepted monolithic meanings by analyzing their complex histories, social contexts, and origins in indigenous religions. Anzaldúa articulates her reasons for interrogating the implications of these icons when she states:

Ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three 'Our Mothers.' *Guadalupe* has been used by the church to mete out institutionalized oppression; to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us afraid of our Indian side, and *La Llorona* to make us a long suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgen/puta* (whore) dichotomy. Yet we have not all embraced this dichotomy. (31)

Anzaldúa recognizes that while social institutions have used each figure in oppressive ways, this does not preclude alternate readings. As she produces this new interpretation, Anzaldúa touches on the issues of the suppression of female sexuality, the normative Chicano family, and the hegemony of the Catholic Church, which are also raised by Cisneros, Moraga, and Castillo in relation to these iconic figures.

Anzaldúa's rewriting of La Llorona shares elements with Moraga's understanding of the figure in *The Hungry Woman*, in that both view her as an early resister of a

patriarchal culture over which she has little control. Referencing mourning rites within Aztec society, Anzaldúa states, “Wailing is the Indian, Mexican, and Chicana woman’s feeble protest when she has no other recourse” (33). La Llorona’s cries then signify not pain or rage, as Cisneros’ Cleófilas understood them, but a refusal to be silenced. Like many scholars, Anzaldúa traces the origins of La Llorona back to Cihuacoatl, “Serpent Woman, ancient Aztec goddess of the earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives,” who carries a knife on her back like a child and howls in the night (35). Cihuacoatl is a manifestation of the creator goddess Coatlicue, terrifying but also powerful and respected (42). However, as she became known as La Llorona, her power was diminished and her story employed as “the culture’s attempt to ‘protect’ members of the family, especially girls, from ‘wandering’” from their domestic roles (36). For Anzaldúa, like Moraga, La Llorona represents a woman “travelling the dark terrains of the unknown searching for the lost parts of herself” (38), the parts that have been stripped from her by history’s reduction of a complex goddess figure to a frightening bedtime story. La Llorona cries to be allowed to signify multiple meanings, and to be whole.

Similarly, as Anzaldúa evokes the story of La Malinche, she draws attention not to the legacy of woman as betrayer, but to the history of woman and the feminine as betrayed: by the Aztecs, by the Spanish, and by Anglos. She continues to view Malinche as an overarching symbol for womanhood, yet rather than using this generalization to imply that all women are inherently tainted solely by virtue of gender, she employs it to indict all the cultures that have historically persecuted Mexican women. “Not me sold out my people but they me,” she repeats three times (21-2). This shift in focus does not require significant rewriting of Malinche’s story, and in fact aligns more closely with the

events as they likely unfolded historically: as a slave, Malinche had little choice in beginning a sexual relationship with Cortés or serving as his translator. After her own people gave her, and twenty other women, as gifts to the Spanish expedition, her survival depended on her ability to make herself indispensable to Cortés (Lanyon 57). Anzaldúa accuses that the collapse of Aztec civilization resulted from the transition from a society of “balanced duality and egalitarian traditions” to a “predatory state [in which] the ruling elite subverted the solidarity between men and women and between noble and commoner” (34). As Anzaldúa reframes this story, traditionally understood on the basis of ideology rather than historical fact, she recognizes these internal divisions rather than Malinche’s single act of “betrayal,” as the source of the destruction of Aztec society.

The myth of Malinche, *La Chingada*, then becomes a story which speaks the pain of generations of women who have been abused, silenced, and misunderstood. Anzaldúa accuses,

The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years....For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spanish, the Anglo, by her own people (and in Mesoamerica her lot under the Indian patriarchs was not free of wounding).

For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard. (22)

While this understanding of La Malinche draws attention to the countless ways that Chicanas have historically been victimized and mistreated, Anzaldúa does not see the figure as wholly negative. She recognizes her own connection to La Malinche and demonized indigenous goddesses as a way to understand the shadow side of herself that society has taught her to suppress. She states, “The Indian woman in me is the shadow:



*La Chingada, Tlazoteotl, Coatlicue*. They are what we hear wailing for their lost daughters” (22).<sup>12</sup> By recognizing that history has abused and misunderstood these “bad” women, Anzaldúa becomes their voice; in reclaiming them, she reclaims the place of the woman within Chicana/o culture. Invisible or perverted by her culture’s dominant stories, the silenced woman continues to exist—“battered and bruised she waits, her bruises throwing her back upon herself and the rhythmic pulse of the feminine. *Coatlalopeuh* waits with her” (23). In Nahuatl, *Coatlalopeuh* means “one who is at one with the serpents,” and Anzaldúa believes that it was this name, homophonous to the Spanish “Guadalupe,” by which La Virgen de Guadalupe initially identified herself to Juan Diego at Tepeyac (29). In this passage, then, Anzaldúa’s understanding of *La Chingada* breaks down the binary division between La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe; both are waiting to be understood as more than history has made them.

Anzaldúa also searches for the indigenous origins of La Virgen de Guadalupe, making her meanings multiple by investigating the desexualization and/or condemnation of the goddesses from which she was drawn. This project is similar to that which Cisneros undertakes in “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess;” Anzaldúa, however, further details the specific history through which myth adapted and changed, focusing especially on the process through which goddess figures were demonized and eventually divided to conform to binary sets of characteristics. Because of the multiplicity of goddesses absorbed in the figure of Guadalupe/Coatlalopeuh, Anzaldúa believes that, “she is the central deity connecting us to our Indian ancestry” (27). For Anzaldúa, most mythological female figures as Chicanas now understand them originate with the creator

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<sup>12</sup> My translation. In the text: “*La india en mí es la sombra: La Chingada, Tlazoteotl, Coatlicue. Son ellas que oyemos lamentando a sus hijas perdidas.*”

goddess Coatlicue, also called “Serpent Skirt,” mother of the celestial deities. As also discussed by Cisneros, Cihuacoatl (the antecedent to La Llorona) and Tlazolteol (the filth eater), represent the darker sides of Coatlicue; another aspect of Coatlicue was represented by Tonantsi/Tonantzin, the benevolent earth mother. Anzaldúa states, “The male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects” (27). Once Coatlicue was divided, she no longer represented real women, but male-created archetypes that failed to reflect the complexities of the female self. In recovering Coatlicue as the source of Guadalupe, Anzaldúa maintains a connection with La Virgen, who she calls Chicana/o culture’s “spiritual, political, and psychological symbol. As a symbol of hope and faith, she sustains us and ensures our survival” (30). Yet she also develops an understanding of what it means to be female outside of the behavioral strictures imposed by the ideal of La Virgen de Guadalupe.

While Anzaldúa does attempt to develop new, more complex interpretations of La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, she also finds that none of these three “mothers” of Chicana culture can, in themselves, speak to her as a whole person. In *So Far From God*, Castillo, upon dismissing existent female icons as insufficient models, chooses to write a new myth in the character of Caridad. With *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa also looks outside of the three dominant mythological female figures for a way to represent the complexities of Chicana identity, but rather than creating a new figure through fiction, as Castillo does, she turns to the past, claiming Coatlicue as the

mythological image that guides her. She explains, “For me, *la Coatlicue* is the consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche” (46). It is the instability and the multiplicity of Coatlicue that allows Anzaldúa to recognize the parts of herself that society has suppressed. Once again, there are echoes of the issues raised by Cisneros, Moraga, and Castillo as Anzaldúa speaks of the difficulty of asserting her sexuality against the rules of the Catholic Church (19) and her individuality against the expectations of the family and *la raza* (173). Coatlicue, through her duality, contradictory nature, and embrace of that which is unacceptable or unspoken, provides a means for Anzaldúa to embrace her own complexity.

Much of *Borderlands/La Frontera* deals with what Anzaldúa terms the Shadow Beast, the darkness within herself that society constantly pressures her to disavow. This part of her encompasses what Anzaldúa calls the supernatural in each human, including sexual and unconscious impulses as well as the god in every person (17). This Shadow Beast represents chaos, the side of the duality between “good” and “bad” that dominant culture has attempted to suppress but cannot eradicate. Each individual fears rejection from the culture if she does not constantly police this element of her psyche. Chicana/o culture enforces this anxiety in Chicanas through the myths of La Malinche and La Llorona, stories that posit women’s inherent corruption as a taint against which women must continually struggle. Anzaldúa’s description of this Shadow Beast depicts a woman with characteristics of a serpent—“lidless eyes, cold clammy moist hand dragging us underground, fangs barred and hissing” (20). This image clearly links Anzaldúa’s Shadow Beast to goddesses associated with serpent imagery, in particular Coatlicue

(Serpent Skirt). The dark serpent of the psyche, forbidden and concealed, reveals herself as the goddess within.

Coatlicue is a fitting iconic image for this mode of understanding the self as goddess *and* beast. As both creator and goddess of death, the figure of Coatlicue inherently refuses binary thinking. As Anzaldúa states, “Simultaneously, depending on the person, she represents: duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective—something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (46). For example, for some, Coatlicue can signify the realization that both birth and death exist in life, and that neither is more pure or more important than the other. For others, she may symbolize the fact that birth and death are, in actuality, essentially the same process. For Anzaldúa, Coatlicue takes on a third role: to “depict the contradictory” (47), and in doing so, to allow those who embrace her to be whole and unified as well as fragmented and out-of-control. Acceptance of fragmentation allows Anzaldúa to acknowledge that as a product of the borderlands, her identity is inherently composed of many selves. When she looks in the mirror, “I would simultaneously look at my face from distinct angles. And my face, like reality, had a character that was multiple” (44).<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Coatlicue inspires a wholeness that arises from the awareness that the self, in all of its intricacies and contradictions, remains spiritual, a reflection of the goddesses of one’s ancestors. Anzaldúa affirms, “There is a greater power than the conscious I. The power is my inner self, the entity that is the sum total of all my reincarnations, the godwoman in me I call *Antigua, mi Diosa* [Ancient, my Goddess], the divine within, *Coatlicue-Cihuacoatl-Tlazolteol-Tonantzin-Coatlalopeuh-Guadalupe*—they are one” (50). Within this

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<sup>13</sup> My translation. In the text: “*Simultáneamente me miraba la cara desde distintos ángulos. Y mi cara, como la realidad, tenía un carácter múltiple.*”

framework, all of these figures are permitted to produce a sum total; they do not need to be divided and classified into categories of acceptability. By taking on Coatlicue as her model of what it means to be a Chicana, Anzaldúa is able to understand her own identity as encompassing an almost endless number of elements.

In a sense, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* demonstrates a synthesis of the methods of rewriting myth used by Cisneros, Moraga, and Castillo. Anzaldúa first deconstructs the dominant stories of La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe. In looking to history to understand the cultural contexts and religious traditions from which each figure originated, she reveals that their meanings are not nearly as stable as is often believed. Ultimately, Anzaldúa turns to the Aztec creator goddess Coatlicue, using her duality and contradictions to craft an image of the Chicana as both multiple and somehow whole. The influence of *Borderlands/La Frontera* appears in the works by Cisneros, Moraga, and Castillo discussed in Chapters 1-3, although each author clearly drew different elements of meaning from the text. The dialogue between the four authors, in collaboration with other influences, has resulted in five texts that provide different possibilities for understanding and navigating the borderlands.

**Conclusion: Myth in the Borderlands: Towards a More Fluid Understanding of Meaning**

In the forward to her second edition of *Loving in the War Years*, Cherríe Moraga reflects back on her early writing, framing her autobiographical explorations of culture and mythology as a project that “thought only of return, someday, to my Califas, where I could be all my fragmented parts at once: the re-membered Coyolxauhqui taking up permanent residence in Aztlán” (iv). The word “re-membered” here, of course, holds three meanings, the most obvious of which references the ending of the ancient myth, in which Coatlicue’s daughter Coyolxauhqui is dismembered and banished into the darkness by her brother Huitzilopotchli. However, “re-membered” also refers to a recovery and remembrance of ancient stories, and to the reconstruction in memory of a figure that has been corrupted and torn apart by historical narratives. Twenty years later, Moraga understands this project of recovering mythological figures through a different lens, stating, “I am returned. Neither Aztec goddess nor completely whole, but well accustomed to the darkness” (iv). The shift here is a significant one—from a recovery project seeking wholeness to a rewriting process which finds the meanings of iconic female figures in their inherent fragmentation.

It is in their undertaking of the second project that the mythological rewritings of Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and Gloria Anzaldúa hold great potential for social and cultural change. All four authors rewrite the figures of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe in part by excavating their indigenous roots to expand their meanings. Through their new understandings of the myths, these authors critique ideological structures that confine women, break down dualistic thinking, and create female icons that are complex and relevant to the lives of contemporary Chicanas.

Each author undertakes this process in a different way. In “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cisneros writes an alternate ending that changes the meaning of the story of La Llorona, while in *The Hungry Woman*, Moraga reproduces La Llorona’s infanticide, but reclaims this original transgression as an act of strength and rebellion. Castillo’s *So Far From God*, on the other hand, abandons existent female icons of the Catholic Church and creates in their place a new myth that draws from a wider range of traditions. Finally, Cisneros in “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” and Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera* excavate older symbols to find the multiplicity that has been stripped from contemporary figures. Yet what rises to the surface in all four authors’ work is an understanding that the meanings of these figures often accepted as fixed within Chicana/o culture are in fact shifting and flexible; although dominant interpretations of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe have historically been used to restrict women, there is an inherent multiplicity already present within them. As these authors embrace the fragmentation of iconic female figures, they are permitted to exist, like the Chicana, in the borderlands, refusing an overarching and stable interpretation.

In a sense, this type of understanding reflects a world where it has become impossible to pretend that meaning can ever be universal. With widespread globalization and migration, borders are increasingly breaking down and a new multiculturalism challenges the hegemony of traditionally dominant groups. In the United States, Chicana/os represent the country’s largest growing minority population; Census records from 2000 list the US Chicano population at 21 million, and this number continues to increase (US Census Bureau). The culture of the United States changes as it adapts to this influx of new citizens who bring their own traditions, language, history and beliefs—

one hopes that before long we will *all* be forced to come to terms with the borderlands. As cultures collide with each other, not only marginalized populations but dominant groups are forced to interrogate their own cultural paradigms. In their work, Cisneros, Moraga, Castillo, and Anzaldúa provide models for challenging and changing the means through which cultural norms are reproduced over generations. Because Chicanas straddle Mexican and American cultures, constantly negotiating the ideologies and contradictions of both, they hold the possibility for a clearer view of issues on both sides of the border. Since US society typically marks white, male, heterosexual, upper-middle class identity as “normal” and “unproblematic,” those in privileged positions are rarely forced to interrogate their own subject positions. Returning again to Sandoval’s concept of differential consciousness, it becomes clear that the “cruising, migrant subjectivity” (179) of the subaltern means that major cultural critiques and renegotiations often must originate with those at the margins of the dominant culture.

In the work of these four authors, we find a framework through which to understand selves that are increasingly fragmented and contradictory and to recognize the instability and multiplicity inherent in all symbols. For these Chicana feminist theorists, however, this dissolution of meaning marks not society’s collapse but an opening of possibilities for a world with less rigid gender roles and more tolerance of difference. Other modes of thought, notably queer theory, have taken up the project finding joy in “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” (Sedgwick 8) created by the contradictions of existence in the modern world. However, often queer theory, and some feminist theory as well, seems to demand that in order to fully embrace the possibility of fluid and unfixed identities for



creating a new nonsexist, non-heterosexist world, we must discard the symbols of the past altogether. That Cisneros, Moraga, Castillo, and Anzaldúa find a way to understand the complexities of contemporary identities without abandoning a connection with heritage, tradition, and history suggest that there is still much to learn from their rewritings of myth.

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