

TOWARDS A GEOGRAPHY OF TRAUMA: FROM *EL PLAN ESPIRITUAL DE AZTLÁN* TO THE BIRTH OF CHICANA SPIRITUAL FEMINISM

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the unbreakable link between Chicana literature and its political/ideological/militant/subversive component, based on a new interpretation of “cultural nationalism.” Explaining the sociopolitical motivations that led to the California student revolts of the 1960s and the Chicana Movement’s *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, I also discuss the ensuing falling-out between the feminine/feminist faction of the Movement and its androcentric majority. I draw on the formal/conceptual/linguistic hybridity of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a metaphor for the radical character of the entire Chicana literary phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: Chicana Feminism, Cultural Nationalism, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

APROXIMACIONES A UNA GEOGRAFÍA DEL TRAUMA:
DE *EL PLAN ESPIRITUAL DE AZTLÁN* AL NACIMIENTO
DE UN FEMINISMO ESPIRITUAL CHICANO

RESUMEN

El artículo explora el vínculo inquebrantable entre la literatura chicana y su componente político/ideológico/militante/subversivo, basado en una nueva interpretación del concepto de “nacionalismo cultural”. Explicando las motivaciones sociopolíticas que llevaron a las revueltas estudiantiles de California en la década de 1960 y el *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* del Movimiento de las Chicanas, este estudio también analiza la consiguiente disputa entre la facción femenina/feminista del Movimiento y su mayoría androcéntrica. Acudo a la hibridación formal/conceptual/lingüística de *Borderlands/La Frontera*, de Gloria Anzaldúa, como una metáfora del carácter radical de todo el fenómeno literario de las chicanas,

PALABRAS CLAVE: feminismo chicano, nacionalismo cultural, *Borderlands/La Frontera* de Gloria Anzaldúa.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2020.81.09>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 81; November 2020, pp. 133-152; ISSN: e-2530-8335



It would be a fallacy to attempt investigating the utterly unique literary phenomenon that is Chicana fiction without recognizing the vast amount of feminist theory it contains, virtually transforming it into a new literary subgenre altogether. In short, one cannot speak about Chicana fiction unless acknowledging its political, subversive, and militant components. The blatantly obvious, self-declared, and deliberate break it takes from the intensely patriarchal values of the original Chicano literary movement becomes manifestly visible starting with the pioneer writings of the first Chicana novelists. Undeniably, Chicana fiction draws much of its creative and theoretical juices from the seminal work of Chicana matriarch and all-encompassing symbol, Gloria Anzaldúa.

As Aída Hurtado pertinently notices in her study “Sitios y Lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminisms,” Chicana feminist activism unfortunately remains, to this day, vastly and severely underdocumented. Strongly linked to all the significant progressive political movements of the 1960s both in the United States and elsewhere, the Chicana literary movement perhaps shares more in terms of ideology and overall values with these than with the more patriarchally-minded, male dominated initial Chicano movement. Albeit rather vague in the beginning and not very coherently defined to this day, given the intensely fragmented nature of the philosophies held dear by the poignantly heterogeneous Chicana community, one aspect remains undebated when describing the core characteristics of Chicana literature: it is largely and unapologetically feminist. There were many spaces of discontent when it came to deciding the Chicanas’ adherence to already established movements and groups seeking to revolutionize the masses’ mentalities, as well as the perception popular with the dominant culture or mainstream points of view.

In a way, Chicanas felt a dire need to create and define an entirely new type of movement built from the ground up on their own terms and according to their own particular view of things, seeing as how none of the progressive movements already in existence at the time included all the dimensions that Chicanas deemed highly significant and *sine qua non* in their struggle for visible and durable transformation. From the very beginning, the Chicana political agenda was mainly centered around the issue of oppression in all its forms and shapes, and it was not about to allow any of the four crucial dimensions of Chicana struggle—namely class, race, gender, and sexual orientation—to fall through the cracks. In Hurtado’s own words,

Chicana feminisms were born out of acts of disruption... to create spaces of resistance to patriarchy in general and patriarchy in their own ethnic/racial groups. ... Chicana feminisms are characterized by finding absences and exclusions and arguing from that standpoint. (135)

As such, the spirit of opposition and symbolic violence that lies at the core of any revolutionary wave or progressive movement becomes the *modus vivendi* for Chicana activists very early on, and to this day remains a fundamental trait of this group’s identity. Unlike white feminists, who seemingly forgot to factor in the issue



of race, and even unlike their fellow brothers in arms from the Chicano community, who failed to push on for women's rights, Chicanas always remembered to put equal emphasis on each and every one of the four dimensions that render the Chicana movement so unique and fierce in its unapologetic ideologic adhesions.

Given the convoluted history of the Chicana/o movement and the aura of controversy which somehow seems to surround all things Chicana/o even today, embarking on the academic journey of describing Chicana literature (namely some quintessentially marginal and feminist women's writings) to a completely alien and lay public proves no easy feat.

When describing the Chicana/o phenomenon, one cannot ignore the highly political red thread that traverses this oftentimes problematic, vastly divisive, and overwhelmingly rich topic. The 1960s' Chicano Civil Rights Movement or *El Movimiento* saw the light of the day during the overtly politicized "atmosphere of protest" (Rosales xiii) that characterized most American campuses during that time of unique intellectual effervescence and civil awakening. Since it started out as a chiefly academic protest and had universities in California as its birthplace, the Chicana/o movement and the game-changing literature it subsequently produced cannot be explained in the absence of a sound critical apparatus and in permanent observance of its ethnically-motivated and social justice-seeking struggles.

For a sample of the outrageous negative clichés that were being perpetuated in the US by Anglo authorities throughout the first part of the 20th century, the following is a characterization given to Mexican immigrants in 1929, in a report drafted by a US Customs agent at the Texas border: "a horde of low-caste Mexicans—ignorant, immoral and unassimilable" (*Official Records of the National Commission* 924).

Just like many other revolutionary movements, whose very core was dissent, rage at both existing and perceived injustice, as well as the dire social circumstances of the community members it represented, *El Movimiento* was not devoid of its occasional exaggerations, which were justified for the most part, given the highly volatile political and societal context in the United States at the time. As such, a type of cultural nationalism also embracing certain separatist tendencies pervaded the Chicano Movement, whose very canon held true the fact that the Anglos and even the representatives of the Mexican American community in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s had taken part in cultural genocide, knowingly stripping the upcoming Chicano generations of any form of genuine cultural heritage and sense of ethnic identity.

But because for many Chicanos the very concept of Mexicanness remained elusive, since they were citizens of the border, having forged a hybrid type of identity—a dual one—, what seemed to make sense more, in terms of ideological coherence, was the newly-coined notion of "cultural nationalism." As F. Arturo Rosales explains in his thoroughly researched book, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, "*Movimiento* participants reconciled themselves to expounding a profuse ethnic pride and cultural affirmation, which was called 'cultural nationalism'" (56). This revival of ethnic identity was meant to counter the dramatic effects of decades of being exposed to the colonizer's rhetoric



in public schools, which many Chicanos claimed had resulted in a form of ‘cultural amnesia’.¹

El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán set the basis of what we know now as *Chicanismo*:

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage, but also of the brutal ‘gringo’ invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán... declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny (qtd. in Rosales 184).

It is impossible to distinguish between the strict literariness of Chicana/o texts and their ideological wiring—the echo of such notions as social struggle, race and class equality, economic justice, and ethnic or gender identity being ubiquitous in Chicana/o literature, regardless of the shape or form that the latter might take. The fact that ideology is the lifeblood, the underlying essence of any form of Chicana/o art is an aspect that becomes clear even to the most unversed reader shortly after going over the first pages of any work authored by a Chicana/o writer. It seems only natural that this would be the case for a literary movement born out of a civil rights one, which in turn took a term—Chicano—that had been long used to shame and humiliate an entire community and transformed it into a symbol of empowerment, pride, and resistance.

“EL MONOLINGÜISMO ES UNA ENFERMEDAD CURABLE”²: SPANGLISH AS A DISRUPTIVE FORCE AND LOCUS OF HEALING

“Cuando entras a esta casa, hija, pisas México.”³

As previously explained, Chicana texts cannot be theorized and properly understood without a thorough grasp of the utterly unique strain of feminism that fuels and nourishes Chicana literature. As certain theorists have argued (Hurtado 135), disruption is what stands at the very core of Chicana feminisms—with one of its more aggressively visible forms being linguistic hybridity. For most writers, the language in which they write is their home, their most private and guarded space of memory, the symbolic locus of their creative energies and the source of their literary power.

¹ An assertion widely attributed to Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, founder of Denver’s Crusade for Justice (Rosales 56).

² “El multilingüismo es el anuncio de un mundo multicultural del cual la ciudad de Los Ángeles, ese Bizancio moderno que habla inglés, español, coreano, vietnamita, chino y japonés, es el principal ejemplo mundial. Hablar más de una lengua no daña a nadie. Proclamar el inglés lengua única de los Estados Unidos es una prueba de miedo y de soberbia inútiles” (Fuentes 12).

³ Pat Mora reminisces about how her grandfather completely forbade the use of English in his house (81).



It comes as no surprise, then, that starting with the foremother Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Chicana writings have built up a resistance to the Anglo/mainstream canon by using language itself as a weapon for change. Chicana literature per se is a hybrid breed, taking manifold shapes and forms, following and integrating no fixed recipes imposed by traditionalist schools of thought, and focusing on little other than innovation and staying true to the spirit of the Chicana/o values. As Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga have proven, the use of Spanglish is not the only disruptive technique employed by Chicana narratives, multidisciplinary approaches and the creative blending together of improbable genres being yet another such method by means of which Chicana literature has managed to undertake the conventional order of things.

The language of resistance and opposition to anything and everything that represents the oppressive status quo—that is, the majority, the mainstream, the stifling mold established by the nebulous figure of the colonizing authority—is, in short, the lifeblood of Chicana literature. In the words of Sonia Saldívar-Hull,

We have to look in nontraditional places for our theories: in the prefaces to anthologies, in the interstices of autobiographies, in our cultural artifacts, our cuentos, and if we are fortunate enough to have access to a good library, in the essays published in the marginalized journals not widely distributed by the dominant institutions. ("Feminism" 206)

What cannot and must not be circumvented when attempting to define Chicana literature or at least find common ground among its various displays, is that the diversity of shapes and forms that characterizes Chicana artistic expression, its hybrid and multifaceted nature, mirrors the concrete, real-life diversity of the Chicana/o community in that such creative endeavors are trying to best represent and make known to the world. As such, the interdisciplinary nature of Chicana feminists' writings is meant to do justice to the complex and often puzzling intricacies of the Chicana/o community itself.

Even the dynamics of traumatic experiences that Chicanas face on a regular basis is as diverse as the particularities of the Mexican American community that these women belong to. A unique cocktail of deeply rooted patriarchal and misogynistic tendencies, widespread poverty and lack of education, arguably misinterpreted religious devotion and obedience to antiquated principles, as well as racist behavior at the level of the entire society towards immigrant communities has made the Chicana into a perfect victim on a variety of objectively noticeable levels.

The fact that, as Aída Hurtado clearly states, the majority of "current Chicana feminist writings are produced by individuals who participated in the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s" (139), there is no denying that political undertones cannot and should not be ignored when striving to interpret and decode the motivations and messages of Chicana writings, regardless of their narrative form.

Hurtado argues that, in addition to its Marxist values, the Chicano movement was infused with a bizarre type of secularized, cultural Catholicism, devoid



of its religious and dogmatic core, yet highly representative of the Chicana/o community as a cultural and its age-old traditions. Although defying religious norms per se and straying from traditional, organized forms of dogmatism, Chicana feminism and its literary transmutations benefit from a deeply rooted spiritual component that is virtually indistinguishable from the spirit of Chicanismo itself.

That is why, when it comes to describing the ultimate symbol of femininity engrained within Chicana/o culture, one always feels compelled to resort to religious and/or spirituality-imbued figures or symbols. The premier, most notorious such dichotomy is that which includes the Virgin of Guadalupe and *La Malinche*, both prominent symbols of the Chicana/o collective consciousness. For many Chicana feminists, theorizing the status of women within their own community's culture started from analyzing the notion of conquest in Mexican history and the role played by female figures in the process.

This is when the stage is taken by *La Malinche*, whom historical accounts unanimously considered a traitor, the ultimate villain who sold out her own people to the colonizer enemy. As Hurtado explains, "Skepticism about women has its origins in the cultural and sexual violation of *La Malinche*. Historically, *La Malinche*, a woman, is the ultimate traitor of Mexico" (140). By accepting the role of translator between the Spaniards and the various Aztec tribes the former were trying to conquer, *La Malinche* earned the metaphorically charged moniker *la lengua*, which literally translates as 'the tongue.' To this day, she is deemed to have enabled the Spaniards' conquest of her own people, thus committing an unpardonable crime. By means of this betrayal, she ended up giving birth—both on a symbolic and literal level, by actually carrying one of the Spanish soldiers' children—to modern Mexico.

So it comes as no surprise that the historical figure of *La Malinche* has managed to elicit many a passionate reaction on all sides of the board, converting *Malintzín* [*La Malinche*] into either a symbol of protofeminism, dissent, and defiance, or a representation of disloyalty and typically feminine weakness—depending on whether the group making the appraisal consisted of feminist or sexist members, respectively. One way or another, *La Malinche* did not remain ignored. As Hurtado observes, alluding to Chicana critic Norma Alarcón's own point of view, "many feminists have engaged the polemics around *La Malinche* either to redeem her, to commiserate with her, or to appropriate her as a feminist hero" (140).

In addition to *La Malinche*, there is a number of iconic female figures that have played a pivotal role in laying the foundation of a strongly Chicana-specific type of feminist conscience. Among them, perhaps the most prominent is the Mexican version of the Virgin Mary, namely *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, who is the definitive role model for what it means to be the ideal woman in both the Mexican and the Chicana/o community: the motherly giver of unconditional love, the nurturing martyr, capable of suffering all and forgiving all, she is the symbol of obedience—the embodiment of everything that the Chicana is expected to be by her family and community. Much like *La Malinche*, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is a puzzling and twofold kind of icon. On the one hand, from a purely feminist point of view, it clearly contrasts with the ideals of rebellion and disruption that Chicanas have been fighting for, but on the other hand, seeing as how it is a highly relevant cultural and



ethnic symbol, it stands for a set of values in which many Chicana/os have found comfort in the face of racially-motivated oppression.

Caught between the urge to “critique the inherent sexism in dichotomizing their womanhood between *Malinchismo* and *Marianismo*” (Hurtado 141) and their duty towards an intensely patriarchal and family-centric community, many Chicanas have been reluctant to embrace any feminist claims for fear they might be considered betrayers of the traditional Chicana/o cause and subsequently ostracized. Because the emerging Chicana movement stood for principles that overtly contradicted the gender dynamics and practices within the entire group, it was violently rejected by many of its more traditionalist members as an attack on the Catholic foundation of the Chicana/o community—in short, as a departure from what the majority considers to be the very essence of Chicanismo, namely its religion-inspired policies regarding gender role assignments and gender-related attitudes. As a result, Chicana feminism was even dismissed by some as “anti-family, anti-cultural, anti-man and therefore anti-Chicano movement” (Nieto-Gómez 35), with its representatives being labeled traitors, sellouts to the white feminist movement, and ‘accused’ of lesbianism.

Chicana feminism, however, took things one step further than just challenging traditionalist gender norms; it introduced homosexuality into the mix, thus scandalizing its opponents even more. Rejection was toughest for these particular members of the Chicana/o community, since—given the ethnic group’s strong reliance on Catholic dogma as part of its cultural identity—lesbianism was universally regarded as a capital sin, while opting for women instead of men as sexual partners was regarded as the worst kind of offense to the patriarchal status quo.

The most well-known and celebrated Chicana feminists—Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Emma Pérez, to name only the most widely recognized—have managed to make sexuality into a key element in their attempt to theorize Chicana feminism, challenging homophobia as yet another layer of rebellion towards the domination of patriarchal values and beliefs. Although improbable, given their commitment to reshaping the image of womanhood and its perception by an otherwise deeply conservative community, Chicanas did not attack the notion of motherhood, celebrating it by way of idealizing their own mothers and making them into anonymous feminist heroes—symbols of strength and resilience in the face of adversity and routine displays of misogyny.

Sexuality did not start playing a central part in the puzzle of relevant aspects that made Chicana feminist writings unique and clearly distinguishable from their Anglo equivalents until the seminal book *This Bridge Called My Back*, first published in 1981 and coauthored by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, which overtly converted such previously taboo issues as lesbianism, sexual pleasure, and female desire into legitimate topics of discussion and analysis. A mixture of sexuality and questions of race—addressing how skin color is the main criterion meant to set the standard for a woman’s physical beauty and desirability—is what sets Chicana feminism apart from other forms of similar attempts at theorization, bringing the notion of *mestizaje* into the limelight. Since there is a bizarre strain of racism practiced even within the Chicana/o community itself, light-skinned women (*las güerás*) are favored because they meet the Anglo-imposed standards of beauty, in opposition



to the dark-skinned ones (*las prietas*), who are shunned because of their phenotype and instructed to avoid sunlight, in order to downplay their tan complexion and thus become more desirable (Zavella 205).

By integrating *mestizaje* into their newly forged feminist discourse, Chicana theorists managed to demonstrate how no one particular community can escape its own deeply-rooted racist, sexist, and homophobic tendencies, regardless of how otherwise revolutionary and disruptive it regards itself to be. By challenging the hegemonic status quo, Chicana feminism went beyond merely scratching the surface of the problem and chased after all those entrenched underlying aspects that compromised the integrity of the Chicana/o community's core of values, shifting the entire perspective so as to transform it into a more female-centric one altogether:

... Chicanas were triply obsessed because they confronted not only gender discrimination but also racial discrimination and, as mostly daughters of working-class Mexican Americans, class prejudice as well. While combating sexism by Chicano men, Chicanas focused not on men as their oppressors but on the American capitalist system that created the racial, class, and gender divisions facilitating oppression (M. García, *The Chicano Generation* 11).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Chicanas adhering to *El Movimiento* started taking issue with the fact that the feminist agenda was not a priority within the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, just as racial oppression was not deemed an essential concern by second-wave Anglo feminists. As such, a new group emerged representing the interests of Chicana feminism, one not claiming balance and moderation as its strong suits, but rather resorting to vehement revolt as a kneejerk reaction to anything the dominating group saw fit to impose. Political moderation and including representatives of the middle class were not a priority for Chicana feminists, who leaned towards the hard left on the ideological spectrum, without any notable exceptions, and remained committed to protecting the interests of the working class in Marxist key, even if it meant alienating middle-class women completely. However, when it came to race, Chicana theorists always steered clear of allowing any type of hierarchies of oppression to be created, realizing that the Chicana or 'woman of color' is itself a racial construct.

This only brings one back to another concept of crucial importance for truly grasping the essence of Chicana/o identity—the symbolic significance of the border and the notion of 'borderlands.' Starting from the historical moment of the 1848 Mexican-American War, a permanent alteration of such concepts as nation, space, and territory took place. The border stopped being a geographical sign, a physical limit, and converted into something fluid and animate—a living, breathing marker of experience put into writing.

In the wake of the physical conflict, the newly-drawn border turned out to be so much more than just a line on the map, the cold representation of defeat made visible on paper. Somehow, the border developed its own aesthetic, acquiring an identity of its own through the stories of those who—once conquered on the battlefield—decided to challenge their conquerors by creating a new "network of cultural codes involving liminality and hybridity, the rewriting of borders, and



the challenging of boundaries created by mainstream cultures and official truth” (Velasco 313). By way of autobiographical texts—including Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* (1983), Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), and Ana Castillo’s *Essays on Xicanisma* (1994), spaces of political demands are being articulated, individual knowledge is being distilled into experiential coming-of-age stories left as testament for an entire community, and the myth and collective imaginary of said community are being reinforced and made new again.

In his book *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, critic José David Saldívar focuses a great deal of the unbreakable bidirectional relationship between culture and the manner in which the border is being experienced by the very community it defines, both on a physical and symbolic level. In “Borders of Fear, Borders of Desire,” Rolando Romero summarizes the manifold metaphors of the border put out there by the numerous authors—writers and critics, poets and theoreticians—that have resorted to it, each projecting their own vision and personal take on the concept and thus, some might argue, abusing the paradigm:

Gloria Anzaldúa has described the border as an open wound while Carlos Fuentes has depicted it as a scar. The border has been drawn as a zipper and characterized as a sore. It has been called a “tortilla curtain” and a geological fault line. It has been allegorized as a scrimmage line and, more currently, has been portrayed as a two thousand mile Love Canal and garbage dump. (36)

When invoking the symbolic inherent in the Anzaldúan term of *La Frontera*, one must not interpret it simply as having the same connotations as its English counterpart. On the contrary, if the English-language words ‘frontier’ and ‘border’ convey the idea of confinement, of restricted spaces and imposing limits, of isolation and separation, the Spanish *La Frontera* is inseparable from the concept of *Borderlands*—a space of contact, interaction, and inclusion. Another important aspect is the role played by border narratives in articulating personal traumatic experiences via autobiographic exercise and integrating them into a collective repository from which the entire Chicana/o community might benefit in the process of healing. As Juan Velasco puts it, it is imperative to link

... the related aspects of cultural forgetting and remembering of trauma to the use of technologies of autobiography through which to represent the personal/collective meanings of loss. I argue that historical trauma and loss complicate the representation of personal history, and trauma recasts the narrative and literary histories of the Americas. (317)

Drawing from this point of view, it is important to add that Chicana autobiographical writings—with Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* being the most appropriate case study—help cultivate agency, which eventually leads to a renegotiation of the very construction of the *mestiza* self, thus creating a new symbolic identity for the Chicanas in the syncopated spaces constructed by the metaphors of hybridity, transculturation, *mestizaje*, and borderland consciousness. Seeing as how, according to Benedict Anderson, a community only exists inasmuch as it is ‘imagined’ or reconstructed by its own members, Chicanas who write give



their community the power of rebirth and redemption from collective trauma by narrating their personal tragedies and therefore exorcise their individual demons by (re)writing (hi)story. As Juan Velasco poetically explains, “through the use of *mito*, Chicana/o writers have connected the histories of loss with the geography of trauma (the border)” (322).

By way of self-representation, Chicana writers in fact give a voice to the countless voiceless, faceless, oppressed, anonymous, and ignored individuals whose stories were never told, but who are still in need of recognition, salvation, and even symbolic avenging. Writing trauma can be a traumatic act in itself, yet this symbolic self-immolation is a necessary sacrifice if it means speaking for those who cannot—the disenfranchised people with no name and no home, spread along the border, claimed by no one and victim to everyone: “When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart, a Nahuatl concept” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 73).

Because Chicanas have written about it, the border can no longer be rendered metaphysical, nor can it be used as a symbol of silence and oppression. By appropriating the source of hurt and redefining it according to one’s own terms, the victim takes control and is suddenly empowered. Thus, the frontier is no more a locus of silence and silencing, but a “contact zone”⁴ meant to reveal the truth of the narrativized self. Taking control of one’s past and history by writing traumatic memory is the ultimate gesture of liberation and agency. The disregarded and oppressed, the ones whose voices had been silenced and stories rewritten by the hegemony are finally experiencing de-marginalization and validation thanks to the power of myth and storytelling. Hence, by voicing out all the pain and sorrow that an entire community had endured in silence for so long, the Chicana writer becomes a *curandera* of sorts—the Anzaldúan ‘new Mestiza,’ reclaiming Aztlán in Spanglish, by writing about trauma, suffering, and loss.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: PINPOINTING THE LOCI OF IDENTITY-ALTERING TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY CHICANA FICTION

“We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.”⁵

—One of the Chicana/o Movement’s most famous mottos
“A woman who writes has power. A woman who writes is
feared. In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts.”

Gloria E. Anzaldúa (*This Bridge Called My Back:
Writings by Radical Women of Color*)

⁴ “I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 34).

⁵ Los Tigres del Norte, “Somos más americanos.”



The image of the Chicana that is being portrayed in novels by female authors is a reclaiming of power and sense of identity in response to the forced molding and shaping of the Chicana's sense of self by a violently retrograde and misogynistic society. Before earning the right to speak for herself, find her own voice and stand up to the unjust and demeaning role that the patriarchy had assigned her, the Chicana had to overcome various obstacles and tear down a series of limitations built entirely of taboos, clichés, glass ceilings, preconceptions, and automated behavioral patterns.

Even more so perhaps than in the case of Anglo sexism, the type of gender normativity perpetuated within the Chicana/o community is enforced by way of a cultural canon that cannot be separated from certain core values of the group, lest the group lose its cohesion and identity. Being a wife and a mother speaks to the very function of womanhood—a woman who is not a wife and mother can hardly be called a woman at all. Moreover, the one attribute that distinguishes between the 'good' woman and the 'bad,' as part of the oversimplified dichotomy employed by the typically *machista* discourse, is obedience. The inclination towards submission, the willing acceptance of a position of inferiority advertised by the male authority as 'natural' and 'normal', is the only prerequisite in order to be considered a 'good' woman. Any form of rebellion or deviation, any curiosity or propensity for asking questions or challenging the status quo is immediately identified and results in a symbolic (and sometimes quite palpable) exclusion of the guilty party from the community. Rejecting abuse and making any claim at independence is considered a betrayal, a form of *malinchismo*, a symptom of corruption, and even a tendency to embrace alien, non-traditional views of the world in an attempt to get rid of one's Chicana/o heritage.

With the emergence of the Chicana feminist movement and its ensuing literary fruit—in the form of fiction by Chicana household names such as Cherríe Moraga, Ana Castillo, and Sandra Cisneros—, a violent shift in common perspective and radical change in perception took place. The quest to redefine one's identity and place in the world became a widely accepted and commendable endeavor within the Chicana/o community, with women being introduced to a whole new set of attributes which completely redefined what proper womanhood was supposed to be.

In Sandra Cisneros' works, the narrative space is defined by multiple instances of duality, with the female figure struggling to escape an oppressive and overbearing existence, marred by abuse, poverty, humiliation, and physical violence at the hands of a male persecutor. The oppression of the fictional Chicana in Cisneros' novels, mirroring the real-life torment of its flesh-and-blood counterparts, is manifold, taking place on several levels. Within the Chicana/o paradigm, she is discriminated against for being a woman—victim to the *machista* worldview of her own community, which expects her to suffer in silence whenever faced with her male abusers' whims—, whereas according to the Anglo society's norms she is also rejected because of her ethnic background.

Cisneros' fictional Chicanas go through the process of either constructing a previously inexistent identity or discovering a renewed perception of the self, as the readers are allowed to witness these characters' journey of becoming over several stages of their life, from adolescence to adulthood. The metamorphoses take place



on an individual level, usually including a sexual awakening, but they also impact the entire community, helping a whole new collective conscience to develop.

In both *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, Cisneros seems to assign crucial importance to the notion of cultural identity, whose key elements are instilled into the Chicana/o's mind very early on, both within and outside of the family home. There is always emphasis on the poor living conditions of the characters that the reader is introduced to, with financial hardships and economic inferiority as elements that prove to be essential in the development of the individual's psyche and perception of oneself. There is a lot of self-defining by means of the main character's impressions and her relationship with the outside world. The name of the main character in *House*—Esperanza, which translates as 'Hope'—is of course symbolic, signaling that one's initial expectations in life almost always end up clashing with a much harsher reality down the line.

The physical space one owns confines them to a certain state of mental imprisonment. Acutely aware of her social status, Esperanza becomes painfully aware of her need to overcome her circumstances—something of which she is always reminded at school, where her house is repeatedly used as an indicator and reminder of her class inferiority: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The House on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says papa. But I know how those things go" (11).

Esperanza's crisis of identity becomes apparent when she rebels against her own given name, which she knows is the same as her grandmother's, as she fears such an overlap would somehow condemn her to the same existence of submission and defeat that her female predecessors have had to endure:

She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window (11).

Although continuously in search of role models throughout the entire book, ironically Esperanza only seems to come across negative versions of who she should become. In an attempt to mature and develop her own personality, breaking free from the constraints of a deeply patriarchal and restrictive tradition, Esperanza finds herself subject to a never-ending cycle of oppression from her own family, as well as witness to the violence that surrounds her from all directions.

Esperanza's friend Sally is the perfect example of the young Chicana whose innocence is lost due to the actions that adults in the community either perpetrate or turn a blind eye to, because certain dynamics of familial relationships—such as a father's complete control of his daughter or a husband's ownership claims over his wife—are considered normal and admirable: "Until one day Sally's father catches her talking to a boy and the next day she doesn't come to school. And the next. Until the way Sally tells it, he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (93).

For these female characters, marriage is not just a normal step, resulting from a process of emotional evolution, as they independently decide to leave their father's



home and start a new life with the man they love. On the contrary, it appears to be a mere transition between one unfortunate situation to the next, in a scenario where the Chicana is little more than a piece of merchandise being exchanged between two people in positions of power:

She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape. Sally says she likes being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money... Except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. (101-102)

In a desperate attempt to flee a violent household, where the role of abuser and oppressor is played by the father, the young Chicana hopes to escape the restrictive and controlling environment of her childhood and finally achieve some degree of independence, but what she gets in return is the need to submit to a different 'master,' whose rules and methods are no less cruel and identity-stripping. The cycle of tyranny, dependence, and abuse is thus reinitiated, with the victim living under the reign of routine terror, without any possibility of escape. Trauma as an individual experience, repeating itself *ad infinitum* under different forms, sends a ripple throughout the very fabric of the Chicana/o community's psyche, mutating into a collective form of traumatic experience and eventually altering the very essence of what it means to be a Chicana in the first place.

Unable to forge a genuinely personal identity, always mirroring the desires and expectations of others—namely the abusive male Other, for the most part—, the Chicana is accustomed to little else than the experience of pain, loss, and the constant infliction of gratuitous violence by those who were supposed to emerge as her protectors (be they fathers, husbands, or lovers). Trauma becomes a fundamental part of who Chicanas are as individuals and thus they develop what I call a *traumatic identity*, which extends to describe the circumstances of an entire group of subaltern women.

The traumatic experiences that the Esperanza must face on a daily basis are not restricted to only one particular space, but find their roots in both worlds where she leads her existence: the Anglo environment (the school), on the one hand, and the Chicana/o one (the neighborhood/the barrio). Since she can think of no physical way of escaping the confines of her life, Esperanza finds symbolic refuge in the world of literature, seeking solace in stories that soon convert into a gateway to acquiring a true sense of identity and individuality: "That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant" (61).

The creative process provides the escape that Esperanza had been longing for. The house she dreams of is not the lavish bourgeois abode of any child's imagination, but a space where her creativity can run free, where there are no rules and restrictions, where she is not expected to be the 'good' Chicana, but herself. There is no rejection of her community's values in Esperanza's quest, but a striving to achieve her independence as a woman, away from any form of violence and male dominance: "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's... A house of my own. On a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as a paper before the poem" (108).



Adjacent to the issue of male-inflicted physical violence, another crucial theme in Cisneros' writing is that of Chicanas' sexuality. Esperanza's voice throughout the book changes from the innocent one of a child to that of a young woman whose personal history of abuse has left a deep mark on her sense of self. Cisneros discusses the notion of virginity and what it means for the Chicana within her highly traditionalist community. The stern code of conduct that Chicanas are expected to follow puts enormous pressure on the female representatives of the group, with the burden of a family's honor and reputation being laid on the shoulders of the wife or daughter. The smallest misstep is considered a severe transgression and punished accordingly, with virginity until marriage being the ideal that all women strive for. In Cisneros' works, however, virginity is not only used as a means of controlling women and removing any possibility of making personal decisions regarding their own sexuality, but also represents a form of acquiring an identity and deciding over one's destiny—a tool for individual development and a form of rebellion.

For Cisneros' female characters, virginity is a marker of the male influence over their bodies and overall existence as human beings. They are not allowed to decide for themselves when it comes to their own sexuality, as virginity is regarded as shared property, belonging to the entire community. The family, not the woman, decides when the loss of virginity should occur. Sexuality is only meant as an intramarital act and should only be used for procreation, not pleasure. In *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, the character Ixchel in "One Holy Night" seems to live in a mythical world, with little understanding of reality. Her childlike simplicity and naïve perception of the world is either a consequence of her extremely conservative upbringing or the reason that she accepted its rules and limitation without questioning them in the first place. When Ixchel breaks the taboo and loses her virginity without her family's consent, thus automatically becoming a 'bad' woman in the eyes of her community, she achieves a liberation of sorts, realizing that the power attributed to this initial erotic act had been arbitrary and exaggerated all along:

The truth is, it wasn't a big deal at all. I put my bloody panties inside my T-shirt and ran home hugging myself... Did I look any different? Could they tell? We were all the same somehow, laughing behind our hands, waiting the way all women wait, and when we find out, we wonder why the world and a million years made such a big deal over nothing (30).

Ixchel's first sexual experience is an act of unconscious rebellion, a rejection of what her community's customs and traditions indicated as admirable and wise. Without even realizing, by taking control of her sexuality in this manner, she takes the first step towards her liberation from the confines of male-established boundaries. However, the symbolic rebellion is an insignificant progress if compared to the amount of abuse, violence, and misery that any given Chicana is subjected to in Cisneros' writings, one way or another. The physical infliction of pain is always complemented by psychological torment, leaving the woman traumatized on multiple



levels, chipping away at her sense of self and stripping her of any genuine identity. At all times, the Chicana is property, left at the mercy of the male master, a victim of patriarchal dominance, with no right to protest her condition or any real chance to improve her circumstances—a caged bird:

This man who farts and belches and snores as well as laughs and kisses and holds her. Somehow this husband whose whiskers she finds each morning in the sink, whose shoes she must air each evening on the porch, this husband who cuts his fingernails in public, laughs loudly, curses like a man, and demands each course of dinner be served on a separate plate like his mother's, as soon as he gets home, on time or late, and who doesn't care at all for music or telenovelas or romance or roses or the moon floating pearly over the arroyo, or through the bedroom window for that matter, shut the blinds and go back to sleep, this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this lord, this master, this husband till kingdom come (49).

The social pressure that the Chicana must endure is tremendous. Regardless of the abuse she suffers in the context of her familial circumstances, the harsh criticism from the community is unidirectional. The Chicana is automatically assigned the blame for whatever goes wrong in her family, with a high degree of misogyny being perpetuated by the more purist women themselves. Public shaming is a widespread means of keeping rebellious Chicanas in line, with the community deeming unsuccessful marriages—without exception—the personal failures of none other than the female victims.

The notion of oppression cannot be separated from the possibility of resistance. As María Lugones argues in her essay, "On *Borderlands*," Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of mestiza consciousness cannot be understood outside the oppression-resistance relationship:

Oppression theory may have as its intent to depict the effects of oppression (alienation, ossification, arrogation, psychological oppression, etc.), without an intention to rule out resistance. But within the logical framework of the theory, resistance to oppression appears unintelligible because it lacks a theoretical base. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* is a work creating a theoretical space for resistance (31).

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa pinpoints concrete instances of oppression and the boomerang effects of opposition that they generate, thus providing the reader with a time-lapse, a temporal map of how the oppressed community has written its day-to-day history of resistance. Anzaldúa refers to herself as having a split or manifold identity—the result of subjugation and trauma on several levels: the self which has repeatedly fallen victim to the outside/Anglo expectations, the self which is under domination by the retrograde and limiting worldview of the Chicana/o community, and the newly emerging third Self—perhaps the most genuine—, which is a progeny of the borderlands.

Torn between her true Self (the innermost sense of identity she has developed as an offspring of the border) and the perceived self (the image of the ideal obedient self, projected onto her by her community), Anzaldúa provides the reader with a



perfect metaphor of her state of being by invoking the Mesoamerican goddess of creation, *Coatloqueuh*, whose dual identity—part *Coatlicue*, an image of darkness, part *Tonantsi*,⁶ representing light—mirrors her own twofold status as a rebellious Chicana of the border.

Anzaldúa explains how the male-dominated Azteca-Mexica ethos forced *Coatlicue* and other similar female goddesses out of the picture, with *Tonantsi* being stripped of her dark attributes and becoming the epitome of maternal kindness. Such a simplification of womanhood became more radical still with the contribution of the colonizers and the traditions promoted by the Catholic Church, with *Tonantsi* metamorphosing into *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the ultimate religious representation of the chaste and nurturing mother. However, Anzaldúa fully rejects the desexualization of *Tonantsi* into *Guadalupe*, embracing *Coatlicue* as its genuine, decolonized version and making her into a symbol of resistance to oppression through creation: “She, the symbol of dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life” (*Borderlands* 35).

What Anzaldúa labels ‘the *Coatlicue* state’ is a mental space where the traces of trauma are being repaired through the healing power of creation. The border and borderlands it consequently molds give way to the construction of a brand-new sense of self, in isolation from the corrupting and restrictive power of outside expectations. Terrifying as it may be, the process of *making oneself anew* through resistance is a form of liberation that Anzaldúa attains not just for herself, but for an entire community of Chicanas whom she represents and thus provides with a legitimate voice.

The *Coatlicue* state allows for the birth of the *new mestiza consciousness*, a concept which Anzaldúa explains as the result of “racial, ideological, cultural, and biological cross-pollination” (*Borderlands* 77). In opposition to monolithic ideals and monochrome female role models, Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness embraces duality and contradiction, hybridity, plurality, and the superposition of seemingly incompatible values, encouraging the transgression of inflexible concepts and obsolete paradigms towards a new system of ideals and principles.

However, in her aforementioned essay, Lugones argues that the concept of dual personality should be dismissed as an Anglo construct—“The dual, hyphenated, personality is an Anglo creation”—and replaced with the notion of plural personality, which is inherently Chicana/o: “The Mexican and the American in the dual-personality construct are both animated from the outside; that is why there is no cultural ‘cross-pollination.’ But the plurality of the new mestiza is anchored in the borders ...” (“On *Borderlands*” 35).

In her “Tongues of Fire: A Tribute to Gloria Anzaldúa,” when speaking about the seminal impact that Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* has had in shaping an

⁶ Here I utilize *Tonantsi* versus the commonly used *Tonantzin* as Alan R. Sandstrom uses it in “The Tonantsi Cult of the Eastern Nahua” in *Mother Worship: Themes and Variations*, ed. James J. Preston (University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 25-50.



entire collective consciousness of empowerment and resistance, Maylei Blackwell inadvertently describes the process through which Anzaldúa manages to convert traumatic experiences into redeeming ones, integrating the traumatized self into the 'plural identity' construct which results from the Chicana's physical and symbolic existence in the borderlands:

Gloria first named and then theorized the violence of exclusion and the space in between binaries. She spoke powerfully and lucidly to our sense of marginalization and demanded that we do the seemingly impossible: to transform those spaces of exclusion and isolation into spaces of community, coalition, and empowerment (155).

Whereas before Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* the border had universally been theorized as a space of exclusion, control, and separation, her revolutionary input rendered possible a shift in the concept's significance, with the border subsequently being interpreted as a space of possibility, a crossroads of transformation and fluidity, as well as a locus of changing power dynamics. Anzaldúa named the borderlands' "intimate terrorism" as the main external factor of friction and opposition, although there are equally many internal elements which contribute to the traumatic experience that the border self must go through: "Homophobia is the fear of going home" (*Borderlands* 20).

In her book *Writing a Woman's Life*, feminist theorist Carolyn Heilbrun states that there are two central aspects to the emancipation of women, namely anger and the act of raising social awareness. Using language and writing as a road towards resignification, Anzaldúa uses Heilbrun's interpretation of anger as a catalyst for social change:

Like my race that once in a while drops its slave posture of obedience, quietness, and acceptance, I have an anger in my flesh. Underneath my look of humility, there lies a rage ready to explode. The price for my rebelliousness [new consciousness] and anger is high-filled with pain and doubt, and filled with feelings of uselessness, stupidity and impotence. I am filled with rage whenever anyone—my mother, the church, the Anglo culture—tells me what to do [to be] without considering my desires (*Borderlands* 37).

As Richard A. García explains in his article, "Toward a Theory of Latina Rebirth," Anzaldúa's theorizations laid the groundwork for the retextualization of gender and reconceptualization of culture in a number of celebrated works by Chicana authors, such as Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (34). In the same vein as Julia Kristeva, Anzaldúa attempts a subversion of the prevailing discourse and longs to establish a new ethno-feminist ethos by redefining the Chicana experience altogether. Reflecting on the most significant Chicana writers' newly emerging visions and ideas—including the relationship between one's community and the self, the dynamics of gender-related power and control, heteronormativity, border identity, and ethnicity-generated crises of identity—, Anzaldúa draws from the



acutely nationalist, separatist tropes so typical of the 1960s, also focusing on the responsibilities deriving from the mestiza status.

Simone de Beauvoir's influence on Anzaldúa's theories is quite obvious, with ideas from *The Second Sex*—such as the distinction between sex and gender, as well as the independent nature of a woman's assigned social roles, which should not be conditioned by her biology—being embraced by Anzaldúa in her theorizations of the Chicanas' place in the world. The objectification of women and the fact that they are only regarded as “mirrors”—allowed little else than simply reflect the dominant paradigm and patriarchal discourse, perpetually oozing subservience and victimization—causes Anzaldúa to incite acts of symbolic rebellion, calling for the creation of the *new mestiza consciousness*:

I am a border woman, I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that Tejas-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradiction. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape (*Borderlands* 19).

Drawing from the Jungian notion of the collective unconscious, as well as Albert Memmi's thesis of the colonized mind's double consciousness in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Anzaldúa recommends slipping into the *Coatlicue* state in order to have access to a reality which transcends all binary oppositions, polarized perceptions, and ethnic reifications. Since Aztec tradition describes *Coatlicue* as a “symbol of the fusion of opposites: the [male] eagle and the [female] serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (47), Anzaldúa claims that by entering the *Coatlicue* state, the Chicana unlocks her unconscious dual nature, at the same time gaining access to a state of superior perception, where history and individual spirituality align with one another and merge:

Anzaldúa argues that every person, every woman exists with an unconscious interiority of dualities, as well as paradoxically with a synthesis, and a dialectic of those dualities. For Anzaldúa, everyone has the potential to exist in ... a spiritual and mystical state consisting of a simultaneity of interior selves engaged in a dialogical process of constant change, repetition, and interrelation (R. García 40).

At present, nearly four decades after the highly influential work, *This Bridge Called My Back* was first published, there is unanimous consensus that Moraga and Anzaldúa have been, as Ricardo F. Vivancos Pérez states in his book *Radical Chicana Poetics*, “the trailblazers of radical Chicana feminism,” leading the way for members of all diasporic/displaced communities to embrace their liberating theories and join their “search for a method of oppositional consciousness” (87).

REVIEWS SENT TO AUTHOR: 25-6-2020;

REVISED PAPER ACCEPTED FOR PUBLICATION: 10-9-2020



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