

“LA MADRE TIERRA QUE NOS MANTIENE Y CUIDA”:
AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF SANDRA CISNEROS’S
“EYES OF ZAPATA”

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an ecofeminist reading of Sandra Cisneros’s novella “Eyes of Zapata.” Inés, the female protagonist of Cisneros’s narrative, is perceived as the strange and dangerous Other by her community, much like nature has frequently been conceptualised as threatening non-human matter. However, as a *curandera/bruja* she forms an empowering relationship with the physical world through her visions. She achieves complete union with nature which alleviates the pain caused by reality and her visions. Inés’s special relationship with the Mexican landscape contrasts Emiliano Zapata’s, her lover’s, disrespectful approach to the elements of nature. By creating a dynamic female character in harmony with the physical world Cisneros crafts a narrative which prioritises those who have often been regulated to the position of the oppressed: woman and nature.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, Emiliano Zapata, *Nagual*, *Curandera*, *Bruja*, Mexican Revolution.

“LA MADRE TIERRA QUE NOS MANTIENE Y CUIDA”:
UNA LECTURA ECOFEMINISTA DE “EYES OF ZAPATA” DE SANDRA CISNEROS

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta una lectura ecofeminista de la novela corta “Eyes of Zapata” de Sandra Cisneros. Inés, la protagonista del relato, es percibida por su comunidad como la “Otra”, como una figura enigmática y peligrosa, que recuerda a la conceptualización usual de la naturaleza como una materia amenazadora, no humana. Sin embargo, Inés, como curandera/bruja, establece una relación de empoderamiento con el mundo físico a través de sus visiones. Logra una unión completa con la naturaleza, que alivia la pena que le causan la realidad y sus visiones. La relación especial de Inés con el paisaje contrasta con la actitud irrespetuosa de Emiliano Zapata, su amante, hacia los elementos de la naturaleza. Con la creación de un personaje femenino dinámico que está en armonía con el mundo físico, Cisneros construye una narrativa que prioriza aquellos sujetos oprimidos que en general han sido reducidos a ocupar una posición subordinada: las mujeres y la naturaleza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ecofeminismo, Emiliano Zapata, *nagual*, *curandera*, *bruja*, revolución mexicana.

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Who ... would consider us holders
of knowledge that could transform this world
into a place where the quality of life for all living things
on this planet is the utmost priority?

—Ana CASTILLO, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, 149

Sandra Cisneros's "Eyes of Zapata" was published in 1991 as part of the short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek*. Like many of the other short narratives of the book, "Eyes of Zapata" focuses on female experience and, more specifically, on the story of Inés Alfaro, one of Emiliano Zapata's mistresses. Set during the Mexican Revolution, the narrative presents the female perspective of the historical events that took place during that time and gives insight into the struggles and limitations women faced and are still facing in Mexican society. Upon a first reading, one would be tempted to examine these aspects of the text, that is how Cisneros creates a historical narrative and infuses it with the voice of a woman obscured by the mythical status of a Mexican revolutionary figure, Emiliano Zapata. However, the text offers a variety of readings and one of these regards the representation of Inés as a woman that manages to form a deep connection with the natural world around her. More specifically, this article aims to explore this link through an ecofeminist lens, since Inés's portrayal as an ostracized person in her community presents similarities with how nature has been conceptualized as the Other. This parallel helps her to achieve a special relationship with the land, evident in how nature is a vital part of her status as a *curandera/bruja* and of her recurring visions, even if these entail pain. Thus, Inés's bond with the environment, which appears to be a source of strength for her, comes into sharp contrast with the negative way in which Zapata is linked to nature, and in this manner Cisneros crafts the narrative of a powerful woman, subverting gender stereotypes in Chicana/o literature.

The association between women and nature has primarily been explored through the theoretical framework of ecofeminism. Janis Birkeland defines ecofeminism "as feminism taken to its logical conclusion because it theorizes the interrelations among self, societies, and nature" (17-18). These interconnections mean that "[e]cofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction" (Birkeland 18, italics in the original).¹ As a consequence, ecofeminism can be immensely useful when it is utilized in literary analyses of narratives of female experience, where conventional power relationships are very likely to be questioned. In fact, "the very essence of ecofeminism is its challenge to

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¹ All italics in quotes are henceforth left as in the original text(s).



the presumed necessity of power relationships. It is about changing from a morality based on ‘power over’ to one based on reciprocity and responsibility (‘power to’)” (Birkeland 19). Ecofeminism’s preoccupation with power is also related to its being “a holistic value system,” according to which all natural things possess “intrinsic value” and “[h]umans should not attempt to ‘manage’ or control nonhuman nature” (Birkeland 19-20).² In other words, what ecofeminism proposes as the antidote to a world characterized by unequal relationships among humans themselves and between humans and nature is the realization that all living things are interconnected and should function in harmony and reciprocal reverence.

In her seminal *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood argues that the root of the problem ecofeminists wish to attack is located in the different kinds of dualisms that have conditioned how we view the world. According to Plumwood, the term “dualism” refers to “the process by which contrasting concepts ... are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive” (31). What this definition highlights is that dualism constitutes a carefully planned mechanism, mostly employed to control who has power over whom. Indeed, the notion of power is of great significance in the context of dualism, since, from the moment two things are conceptualized as opposites, one is bound to be more powerful, producing a type of domination; thus, dualism “distorts both sides of what it splits apart, the master *and* the slave, the coloniser *and* the colonised, the sadist *and* the masochist, the egoist *and* the self-abnegating altruist, the masculine *and* the feminine, human *and* nature” (Plumwood 32). As a result of such dualisms, women and nature are relegated to the position of the oppressed, a position which does not conform to the master narratives that the marked categories of dualism create and sustain. The issue with this association is that “to the extent that women’s ‘closeness to nature’ is mainly a product of their powerlessness in and exclusion from culture..., affirmation of these qualities, which are the products of powerlessness, will not provide a genuine liberatory alternative” (Plumwood 32). This is why ecological feminists seek to assign positive meaning to the connection between nature and

² Interestingly enough, this idea was originally voiced by a male philosopher and ecologist, Aldo Leopold. In his *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (1949), Leopold expands on biocentric ethics and argues for an ethical reformation of the relationship between humans and the land. In particular, he observes that, although ethics regulate human society and interpersonal relationships, “[t]here is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it” (173). This is because land is considered a possession and the way people view this physical world “is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations” (173). As a result, Leopold proposes what he terms “land ethic,” that is an ethic which “changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (173). Even though what Leopold essentially suggests is equality among all forms of life, it is surprising that he disregards women’s struggles in mid-twentieth-century American society.



women and thus shape new narratives which erase dualism and promote powerful associations between elements that previously fell into the category of the oppressed.³

Cisneros's novella "Eyes of Zapata" appears to be such a narrative. Inés's experience considerably parallels how nature has been perceived throughout time, and this correlation paves the way for a reading of Inés as a woman who connects deeply with nature and thus becomes a dynamic figure. To illustrate, as Marti Kheel writes, nature has largely been delineated as a female "alien force" in Western thought (244). This process of otherization has been achieved through the means of two kinds of imagery, namely nature as a "beast" and as "mindless matter" (Kheel 245-46). The image of nature as merely substance can be linked to what Plumwood terms as "backgrounding," meaning identifying women and nature as the backdrop to the ongoing progress that takes place in the world (21). These two broad categories, through which nature has largely been approached, apply to Inés's experience as well. Inés is indeed thought of as an evil and threatening entity by the members of her community, since she confesses that the villagers blame her for the destruction brought on by the Carrancistas: "It's *her* fault, the villagers said when they returned. *Nagual*." (104). The parallel between Inés and the environment is hinted by the word "nagual." In the Mesoamerican folk tradition, some people are believed to possess the power to transform into a nagual, that is into a dangerous mythical creature ("Nagual"). As a result, the imagery evoked in the text both associates Inés with elements of the physical world and affirms that the villagers consider her a witch in the form of a beast. Furthermore, for Zapata, Inés serves as the background of the main action of the Mexican Revolution and this is evident in the scant attention he gives her: "The months I disappeared, I don't think you understood my reasons. I assumed I made no difference to you" (105). Zapata only visits Inés and their children once in a while during the Revolution, therefore he does not notice when Inés disappears. He thinks of her as the background to his revolutionary/political action, since she is a woman and, in his eyes, unable to participate in an armed conflict.⁴ Consequently, Inés's experience has some striking similarities with the way the environment has been viewed as the incomprehensible and inferior Other.

The parallel between Inés and nature provides the foundations for an analysis of Inés as a woman, and, specifically, a woman of color, who connects to nature in a profound way, and perhaps the most enlightening manifestation of this can be found when she narrates her experience as a *curanderalbruja*. Chicana writer and scholar Ana Castillo describes *curanderismo* as "alchemy for cures, a combination

³ Ecofeminists stress the need for such connections. For example, scholar Catherine Roach writes that "we can agree that women are closer to nature but disagree that this association must be disempowering. We can instead promote this association as enriching, liberating, and as according both women and nature high value" (52). Roach terms this idea "the 'nature feminist' position" (52).

⁴ Barbara Brinson Curiel supports that "Inés is a revision of the icon of La Adelita, the Mexican revolutionary woman also referred to as La Soldadera, who, like the other feminine figures, is frequently characterized by self-sacrifice and suffering" (422). This connection further accentuates the passivity attributed to Inés by Zapata.



of modern medicine and ancient practices” (146). Castillo distinguishes a *curandera* from a *bruja*, mentioning that the former focuses on curing physical pain or illness, whereas the latter is “a spiritual healer or psychic” (156). In the text, Inés appears to be both. For example, when her Tía Chucha falls ill, she attempts to cure her with natural treatments: “I used all her remedies and my own, *guacamaya* feathers, eggs, cocoa, beans, chamomile oil, rosemary, but there was no help for her” (102). Tía Chucha seems to be instrumental in Inés’s introduction to this holistic system of folk medicine, as she is a *curandera* herself: “My Tía Chucha cured me with branches from the pepper tree and with the broom. And for a long time afterward, my legs felt as if they were stuffed with rags, and I kept seeing little purple stars winking and whirling just out of reach” (104). What is of interest in this specific excerpt is that the tree rags are presented as an extension of Inés’s body, as if she has become one with the physical world. She has been cured with the help of nature, but she feels the effect of this contact for a long time afterwards. As a *curandera*, Inés has learned to be part of the environment, much like a free-roaming animal: “We’ve eaten like the birds, what we could pluck from the trees—guava, mango, tamarind, almond when in season” (102). She can live in harmony with nature, sustaining herself and her children on what the natural world offers. In fact, reverence for and respect towards the environment are the most important aspects of *curanderismo*, since the healing tradition is based on “a perception of life as being physically connected from atom to atom, no single part being more essential nor grander than the rest and that we are all vital to each other” (Castillo 156). As the aforementioned examples show, the belief in the interconnectedness of all things in the universe is what characterizes Inés’s relationship with nature.

Apart from a *curandera*, Inés is also a *bruja*, since she has visions, which are a vital aspect of her character, and these visions are inspired by the natural world. To explain, Chicana scholar and theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa argues that Chicanas/os and *mexicanas/os* possess “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (38). Anzaldúa terms this ability *la facultad* and stresses its being different from reason; it is related to the psychical realm of a person’s existence (38). Additionally, the fact that Inés is familiar with and practises *curanderismo* further enables her to perceive more than what her concrete surroundings offer, as practitioners have access to the magical side of life (Castillo 155).⁵ Although Inés’s supernatural skills are alluded to in the title (Curiel 407), it is not until much later, when she prays to the *Virgencita*, that her powers become explicit: “When I woke the world was filled with stars, and the stars carried me back to the village and showed me” (103). Stars have conventionally been associated with guidance and access to knowledge, both often symbolized by the

⁵ Maythee G. Rojas contends that Inés as a mistress inhabits “a liminal space—a fluctuating zone of liberation and oppression,” since she is perceived as belonging to a man, but she does not have the responsibilities of a wife, and in order to interpret this liminal identity, she depends on her body and her sexuality (136). Such a reading further affirms Inés’s status as a woman with a heightened and enhanced perception, since her liminality gives her access to multiple realities.





light they emit. Moreover, they are considered an important part of Aztec culture and they are often found in visual representations of La Virgen de Guadalupe.⁶ Here, Inés awakes into a different world of transcendental knowledge, which the stars help her to explore. In this new realm, she achieves her own union with nature, manifested in the images of Inés as a bird throughout the novella. Although she is described as a *nagual* by the people of her community, she has wings which make “the sound of a velvet cape crumpling” (87), while she is hovering above Zapata’s body. Eventually, she transforms into an owl: “I turned into the soul of a *tecolote* and kept vigil in the branches of a purple jacaranda” (99). Owls are animals with exceptionally good vision, much like Inés, and since ancient times they have been symbols of wisdom and knowledge.⁷ These qualities are transferred onto Inés and, thus, the text demonstrates how the natural world forms the basis of her visions.

Nevertheless, Inés’s supernatural skills are not necessarily a source of pleasure, since, as Anzaldúa observes, the concept of *la facultad* entails the element of pain (38). Inés reveals that Tía Chucha “was the one who taught [her] to use [her] sight” (105), as women have been granted the responsibility of securing the existence of a cultural continuum “with daily rituals of popular culture and by passing faith from generation and generation” (Castillo 145). Despite knowing how to use her powers, Inés falls into the trap of seeing Zapata with his other women in her visions: “I saw you asleep next to that woman from Villa de Ayala ... And her skin shone blue in the moonlight and you were blue as well ... Then I felt a terrible grief inside me” (98). The sight of Zapata with another woman evidently distresses her, but once again it appears that she resorts to nature in order to alleviate her pain, since her Tía gives her a tea made from flowers, “a tonic with the dried blossoms and [applies] a salve, mixed with the white of an egg” (97). Inés herself is highly aware of how pain is a constant parameter in her life: “We drag these bodies around with us ... these bodies that give us pleasure and pain” (89). If her physical existence can cause her pain and psychological suffering, then one can see why she considers her nature-inspired visions an integral part of her life. The above excerpt also indicates that, although she can separate body from soul willingly, Inés recognizes the necessity for both in her life, thus doing away with dualisms. She knows that life can be full of pleasure as well as pain, and she also embraces both her physical and her spiritual side, since, after all, she uses parts of her body in her visions, visions which are grounded in the natural world. Therefore, pain becomes only one of the aspects of how Inés conceptualizes her presence in the world as a holistic experience.

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Inés’s unique relationship with the natural world develops into a source of strength. More particularly, this becomes

⁶ Anzaldúa identifies La Virgen de Guadalupe as originating from Coatlicue, “the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb” (46). She stresses the significance of this Aztec deity as “Goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes” (46).

⁷ Owls have repeatedly been associated with *curanderismo* in Chicano literature. For example, in Rudolfo A. Anaya’s novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, an owl accompanies the titular *curandera*.

evident in the following passage: “I took to eating black things—*huitlacoche* the cord mushroom, coffee, dark chiles, the bruised part of fruit, the darkest, blackest things to make me hard and strong” (106). This is her reaction to the community that accuses her of being a witch because of her spirituality. By feeding on the diseased parts of corn and other brown or black foods, “Inés resists the oppression of whiteness and its association with patriarchy, thereby altering the power such a system possesses” (Rojas 152).⁸ The resistance Inés displays proves that her interaction with the environment molds her into a powerful persona, one who may have been “a historical footnote” (Curiel 404), but who manages to resurface from obscurity through the strength with which nature provides her. Another instance of how nature empowers Inés appears when she takes refuge in the mountains: “Sometimes the people of the cold lands give us boiled water sweetened with cane sugar, and we stay until we can gather a little strength, until the sun has warmed our bones” (102). Even the simplest, yet most basic, natural elements, such as water and the sun, can be of benefit to Inés. For her, the land is “*la madre tierra que nos mantiene y cuida*” (110), the Mother that cares for all living things. As a historical person, Inés is excluded from the narrative of the Mexican Revolution and the myth surrounding Zapata, but as a literary character, her story is recuperated and her voice heard, since she is portrayed as a strong, inextricable part of nature.

Inés’s unique closeness to nature comes into sharp contrast with Zapata’s invasive approach to the land. In “Eyes of Zapata,” Cisneros “strips [Zapata] of his iconic and monumental heroic status” (Curiel 405). Throughout the novella, the General appears to represent domination over the environment. For example, his *charro* suit links him to horsemanship, that is to the taming of a wild animal (Curiel 411), something that hints at how detached he is from the environment. Unlike Inés, he does not find solace in nature, but annoyance: “Everything bothers you these days. Any noise, any light, even the sun” (86). Moreover, Zapata capitalizes on animal trade, “buying and selling livestock all through the *rancheritos*” (90). This is also the primary reason that Inés’s father does not like him: he is a *charro*, not a *campesino*, and, consequently, he does not have a genuine connection to the land. His inability to create a harmonious relationship with the natural world is further stressed by the fact that if he is associated with a natural element, this happens in a negative way. An instance of this can be found when Inés and Zapata meet for the first time: “You circled when I tried to cross the *zócalo*, I remember. I pretended not to see you until you rode your horse in my path, and I tried to dodge one way, then the other, like a calf in *jaripeo*” (108). Here, as Curiel correctly notes, “[c]ourtship is described in terms of a cattle roundup, with the man on horseback and the woman playing the part of pursued animal” (418). What is more, Inés discloses that she

⁸ According to Rojas, Inés becomes an even more dynamic character if one considers the historical female figures with whom she is linked, for example La Malinche (152). This becomes a considerably powerful connection if one takes into consideration the parallel between the sexual and cultural abuse of La Malinche and the destruction of the natural resources of the New World by the *conquistadores*.



feels as if she were a calf caught in a Mexican bull riding show, thus connecting the General to a treatment of animals that is devoid of respect and reverence.⁹ If Inés is in harmony with the natural world, then Zapata stands for the wild force that comes to disrupt this balance. Given that Zapata's image, a heroic and all-powerful image, is continuously utilized by androcentric culture and symbolizes men's power over women as well as the unfair sexual double standards that relegate women in an inferior position (Curiel 422), "Eyes of Zapata," as a literary text, offers a counter-narrative from the ecofeminist angle. Cisneros portrays Zapata as a man at a distance from the environment and demythologizes the idealistic representations of him found in the master narratives of the Mexican Revolution. According to Ellen McCracken, "'decentering master texts' is a way of re-semanticizing community" (qtd. in Curiel 424), and this is exactly what Cisneros achieves in the novella. She dismantles Zapata's idealized image that history has produced, and she assigns new meaning to him and to Inés as historical people, thus demolishing and rebuilding the foundations of how we think about history, heroes, men, women and nature.

In conclusion, Sandra Cisneros's "Eyes of Zapata" is a text that can support an ecofeminist reading of Inés Alfaro, a woman who has been silenced in the historical evidence surrounding Zapata's involvement in the Mexican Revolution. In the novella, Inés connects to the Mexican land in a unique way, since she is a *curandera* and a *bruja*. She depends on nature to survive, feeding on plants on which animals usually feed, and she achieves complete union with the natural world through her visions; she transcends the boundaries of reality, transforms into a bird and gains access to a different kind of knowledge, beyond what is available to her as a woman in a restrictive community that perceives her as a threat. Moreover, for Inés the environment is a source of solace, as she uses natural elements to alleviate the pain she experiences as one of Zapata's numerous mistresses. While Inés's closeness to the land evinces admiration for and unity with nature, Zapata is exposed as a man who cannot grasp the ways of the natural world and, therefore, his reaction is to attempt to dominate it. Consequently, seen through an ecofeminist perspective that traces the links between nature and women, Cisneros's narrative alters the historicity of other narratives that either silence Inés or depict her in a negative light, and it offers a novel portrait of the heroine as a dynamic female figure, who draws her strength from her contact with the environment. Such a depiction challenges the power dynamics found in stereotypical representations of Mexican people and renders Cisneros a writer and a thinker who envisions a brighter future not only for Chicanas, but for all women.

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⁹ Animal symbolism and, specifically, the figure of the bull, has been a central aspect of a number of American literary texts with a prominent example being Ernest Hemingway's depiction of bullfighting in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). However, a detailed analysis of the symbolism of the bull here is beyond the scope of this article.



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