FROM WAILING TO HOLLERING: LA LLORONA IN SANDRA CISNEROS'S "WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK"

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Abstract: Doubly marginalized, both by her ethnicity and by her sex, the Mexican-American woman seems to always be trapped in the borderlands. Neither here, nor there, not being able to occupy a full place in any of the cultures she theoretically belongs to, her home is the threshold, the fence, or, to use Chicana critic and writer Gloria Anzaldúa's words, the "thin edge of barbwire". However, over the years, significant new shifts have challenged old paradigms, allowing for a redefinition of Chicana identity. This new feminist discourse functions as a practice of intervention, a counter-narrative aiming at creating a new consciousness by recovering women's place in society. Acting on this new awareness, Sandra Cisneros takes on reinventing indigenous icons associated with female subjectivity, thus questioning and revising the female stereotypes that have long disempowered Chicanas. This paper aims at providing a glimpse into the transformation of Chicana mythology as portrayed in Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek". Bringing together old female stereotypes in the figure of La Llorona, Cisneros implies that these cultural icons are not unquestionable, and can therefore be modelled and transformed so as to fit the new identity.

Keywords: Borderlands, Chicana feminist discourse, female stereotypes, La Llorona, counter-narrative

"Basta de pasividad y de pasatiempo mientras esperamos al novio, a la novia, a la Diosa, o a la Revolución *(enough of passivity and passing time while waiting for the boy friend, the girl friend, the Goddess, or the Revolution).* No nos podemos quedar paradas con los brazos cruzados en medio del puente *(we can't afford to stop in the middle of the bridge with arms crossed)"* (Anzaldúa, This Bridge Called My Back)

"I'm trying to write the stories that haven't been written. I feel like a cartographer. I'm determined to fill a literary void", Sandra Cisneros told Publishers Weekly in 1991 (Cisneros in Doyle 53). Not only filling gaps, but also opening a new ground, a borderland space where old cultural myths are recreated and given new meanings, Cisneros lends a voice "*A las Mujeres*/To the Women". For the new mestiza, speaking is not solely a means of expression, but an act of resistance, challenging the politics of domination that have kept her voiceless, developing a counter-narrative that functions as a corrective to old paradigms (Hooks 8). Not only struggling against Anglo dominance, but also against Chicano sexism, "alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture", the Chicana finds herself trapped between "*los intersticios,* the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera 20).

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Once petrified, blocked and unable to respond to the "cultural tyranny" men impose upon her, the new mestiza breaks free of the rigidly defined roles men assign her to. The "dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable" (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera 16) are now challenged and transformed so as to fit the new identity. When interpreting the various processes involved in the transformations of Chicana mythology, Rebolledo argues:

If, however, the existing mythology (as defined by patriarchy) is unable to fulfil the increasing demand for women as active, energetic and positive figures, then women writers may choose myths and archetypes, historical and cultural heroines, that are different from the traditional ones. They may create new role models for themselves or choose existing models but imbue them with different (sometimes radically different) traits and characteristics (Rebolledo in Ramirez 232).

Chicana feminist discourse thus becomes a "practice of intervention", taking on both the internal domination and the external repression of the Mexican-American woman (Saldivar-Hull 125). While Anzaldúa provides a methodology for creating a new consciousness by recovering women's place in society, Cisneros acts on her awareness and takes on reinventing indigenous icons associated with female subjectivity, questioning the stereotypes that have long alienated and disempowered Chicanas.

The story of Cleófilas in Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek" extends and revises such feminine stereotypes, implying the possibility of changing one's affiliation with disempowering social myths (Wyatt 254). Binding together heroines of contemporary Mexican *telenovelas* with the archetype of La Llorona, Cisneros implies that though Mexican ideals of femininity are essentially models of suffering and submission, such cultural icons are not unquestionable and can therefore be modelled and transfigured into creating "a new mythos – that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves and the ways we behave" (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera 80).

Inhabiting a border zone between Anglo and Mexican cultures means more than simply being in-between and undergoing a "struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera 78). The fluidity of the borderland, derived from the overlapping of cultures, and the shift between cultural codes and ways of being and thinking transform the borderland space, once perceived as negative, into one in which negotiations concerning fixed gender ideals can take place. Moving back and forth between two cultures essentially offers the possibility of choosing signifiers from either side. Fixed definitions become flexible, and can thus be contested and revised:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera 79).

Travelling across the border, in both the literal and spiritual sense of the word can give transformative power, as Cisneros implies in "Woman Hollering Creek". The story begins as Don Serafin gives Juan Pedro permission to take his daughter "across her father's threshold, over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a

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town *en el otro lado* – on the other side" (Cisneros 457). Filled with visions of love and marriage largely fuelled by the *telenovelas* she watched as a girl, travelling "e*n el otro lado"* initially means nothing more than exchanging her father's house for her husband's, a town on one side of the border with one very much like it on the other: "The town of gossips. The town of dust and despair. Which she has traded for this town of gossips. This town of dust, despair." (Cisneros 463).

As she was soon going to find out, married life does not imitate the plots of the *telenovelas.* What she wants, what she has been waiting for is "passion in its purest crystalline essence. The kind the books and songs and *telenovelas* describe when one finds, finally, the great love of one's life, and does whatever one can do, must do, at whatever the cost" (Cisneros 458). Glamorizing pain as a necessary part of a woman's life, the *telenovelas* do nothing more than prepare Cleófilas for the submission required of a 'traditional' wife (Wyatt 255). She adopts the idea of suffering as an inherent condition of love: "Because to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow" (Cisneros 459). The 'good woman' from the *telenovelas* becomes a role model for the ordinary woman, who assumes her role of "the all-enduring bearer and reliever of the sufferings of others" (Oliver-Rotger 215), while waiting for her happy ending. As expected, Cleófilas's visions of love soon break into pieces. The sweet pain one must endure can be physical, as well as emotional:

The first time she had been so surprised she didn't cry out or try to defend herself. She had always said she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her. But when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again, until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the *telenovelas*. . . . She could think of nothing to say, said nothing (Cisneros 461).

Immersed in the fantasies she has created about her new life with the help of romance novels and *telenovelas*, Cleófilas is indoctrinated into a culture of weeping women, as the tale of La Llorona is constantly retold all around her (Doyle 56). Her own life begins to resemble 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" (Cisneros 465). Numbed into silence by the clash between her husband's beating and her prior visions of love and marriage, Cleófilas remains submissive to her husband, because "there is no place to go" (Cisneros 464).

Ashamed of returning to her father's house, not having a mother to speak with and ask for advice or a female community to turn to for help, Cleófilas turns to the closest feminine entity she knows and who is calling for her, a creek named "La Gritona", or "Woman Hollering": "The stream sometimes only a muddy puddle in the summer, though now in the springtime, because of rains, a good-size alive thing, a thing with a voice all its own, all day and all night calling in its high, silver voice. Is it La Llorona, the weeping woman?" (Cisneros 464). After the heroines of the *telenovelas* fail her, Cleófilas turns to a traditional icon of Mexican mythology, who, ironically, offers yet another variant of the same ideal of passive female suffering.

La Llorona, a folktale circulating for centuries in Mexican tradition, survives today in many forms and variants. Sometimes, she is said to have killed her children because she was

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jealous of them for getting all her lover's attention. Other times, the figure is fused with La Malinche, who is said to have killed her son, then herself. Other legends depict La Llorona as the ghost of La Malinche, who mourns her children, the Indians whom she betrayed (Wyatt 256). Usually, she is presented as a mother who has drowned her children and is thus eternally cursed to wander and wail for them. It is not difficult to see the common element of all these different variants. Irrelevant of the circumstances of her story, La Llorona is always depicted as a wailing, powerless woman; her cry of sorrow has penetrated all stories throughout the centuries.

La Llorona weeps, Anzaldúa observes, because it is her only means of protest: "Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse" (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera 33). Again, as in the cases of La Malinche and Virgin of Guadalupe, culture has transformed yet another Aztec female goddess into a reminder of a woman's sin. In all versions of the legend, La Llorona represents guilt through all her actions and affronts to the accepted roles of women. Apart from being depicted as a sexual entity, she betrays all notions of motherhood, and by being cursed to an eternity of repentance and wailing, she becomes a symbol of the repercussions of stepping out of one's place (Fitts). Traditionally viewed as a wicked, rebellious woman, La Llorona can be said to belong to the borderlands, as her image combines features of both aspects of the "*puta/virgen* dichotomy" (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera 84). The survival of her myth can be explained through the multiplicity of her meanings, which are still culturally resonant (Candelaria in Doyle 58).

Cisneros's La Llorona is no longer a figure of sin, of disempowerment, of guilt. The creek, whose name and origin seem to have been forgotten and considered irrelevant, is yet another important crossing point for Cleófilas. As Juan Pedro drives her over a bridge spanning "La Gritona", Cleófilas wonders how "a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after*"* (Cisneros 461) came to have such a funny name. She cannot, however, explain her fascination with the name to Trini: "How could Cleófilas explain to a woman like this why the name Woman Hollering fascinated her?" (Cisneros 460). For Cleófilas, the simple association of 'woman' and 'hollering' seems inappropriate, funny, and not having a true-to-life meaning.

Trapped in the house, confined by linguistic, cultural and economic barriers, having her ideals of love and marriage shattered by the gruesome reality in which she now lives, Cleófilas starts thinking of all the other silenced, abused women in the newspapers: "This woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car. This one's cadaver, this one unconscious, this one beaten blue. Her ex-husband, her husband, her lover, her father, her brother, her uncle, her friend, her co-worker" (Cisneros 464). "I remember *la Jila* following me once, remember her eerie lament. I'd like to think that she was crying for her lost children, *los* Chicanos/*mexicanos*" (38), writes Anzaldúa in her *Borderlands/La Frontera.* Cisneros's Llorona, in turn, cries for the lost women, mourning their woundedness, their pain and rage. "A good-size alive thing, a thing with a voice all its own" (Cisneros 464), La Llorona speaks for them, her daughters, enabling them to release themselves from the constraints culture and society has imposed on them.

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Cleófilas's dreams of a happily-ever-after are finally put to sleep when her husband literally throws them in her face: "He had thrown a book. Hers. From across the room. A hot welt across the cheek. She could forgive that. But what stung more was the fact that it was *her* book, a love story by Corin Tellado, what she loved most now that she lived in the U.S." (Cisneros 465). With no happy ending in sight, she will now no longer "sit mute beside the conversation" and "laugh at the appropriate moments, lean against her husband's sleeve, tug at his elbow, and finally predict where the talk will lead" (Cisneros 461-62). She has passed the point of having to remind herself why she loves

this man who farts and belches and snores as well as laughs and kisses and holds her. . . . 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 (Cisneros 462-63).

On her way to a new consciousness, the mestiza's first step is to take inventory, Anzaldúa argues: "She puts history to a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of" (Borderlands/La Frontera 82). Part of these forces are exercised by men, intoxicated with a new kind of "machismo", "an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem" (83). It is exactly this loss of dignity and a deep sense of racial shame that leads men to put down, and even brutalize women. Anzaldúa speaks in the name of all Chicanas, Cleófilas included, when she demands admission from men "that they wound us, violate us, are afraid of us and of our power. We need them to say they will begin to eliminate their hurtful put-down ways" (84).

Cleófilas, on the other hand, cannot wait for her husband to admit to his "hurtful put-down ways". If her language (read culture, tradition, values etc.) does not allow her to resist him and thus move out of her place, she will find alternative ways. It is in the discourse of the American doctor that she finally discovers a voice powerful enough to counter that of her husband. Juan Pedro eventually agrees to take her to the doctor's appointment, for the health of her unborn child. In return, she agrees to keep silent about his violence: "No, she won't mention it. She promises. If the doctor asks she can say she fell down the front steps or slipped when she was out in the backyard, slipped out back, she could tell him that" (Cisneros 465).

Cleófilas keeps her promise. She keeps silent. La Llorona, however, does not, as she speaks through the only way she knows: through water. Cleófilas's torrent of tears and the "back-and-blue marks all over" (Cisneros 466) her body help tell the story she has no voice for yet. La Llorona not only speaks for her, but also helps Cleófilas by sending two of her daughters: Felice and Graciela – the two women who help Cleófilas run from her husband and all that her previous life represented. At first sight, it would seem that these two women are clearly from very different cultures. This becomes apparent when Felice is driving Cleófilas and her small son across "La Gritona":

But when they drove across the *arroyo,* the driver opened her mouth and let out a yell as loud as any mariachi. …

"Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler." She said this in a Spanish pocked with English and laughed.

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"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. …That's why I like the name of that *arroyo*. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right?" (Cisneros 467).

In reality though, they all struggle with the same contradictions, "clashes of voices" and cultural dichotomies, leading "a struggle of borders", as they constantly "walk out of one culture and into another" (Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera 77). Anzaldúa defines la mestiza as a "product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another". The new mestiza, by contrast, has understood that only through juggling cultures, operating in a "pluralistic mode" and developing "a tolerance for contradictions" she will be able to cope (78-80). She assembles herself by taking bits and pieces from all cultures, keeps what she can and transforms what does not fit (Alarcon 124).

Crossing back her husband's threshold, the bridge over Woman Hollering Creek, the U.S./Mexico border and finally, entering her father's threshold again, Cleófilas returns a changed woman. Her path through the "borderland territory of the new mestiza" is complex (Doyle 65); she may not have finished her transformation, but she has recovered her voice – not for wailing or weeping, but for hollering. The myth of La Llorona is thus transformed, rewritten and (re)codified with the heterogeneity of the present. Through the recuperation of the weeping woman, Cisneros conducts a practical intervention into colonial, patriarchal and also child domination ideologies. In contrast with the traditional Llorona, Cisneros's becomes a true heroine, a legendary woman who hollers a scream of resistance against patriarchal definitions of womanhood.

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