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Master' s Thesis

Miscegenation and the Rise of the New
Mestiza/Mestizo in the Works of Sandra
Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros의 작품에서의 이종간 결합과 새로운 *Mestiza /*
*Mestizo*의 부상

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Miscegenation and the Rise of the New *Mestiza/Mestizo* in the Works of Sandra Cisneros

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Abstract

After Spain colonized Mexico, it established cultural dominance through both education and religion. The intermarriage between the indigenous and the Spanish brought about a new race of people collectively known as the *mestizaje*. Although a new race of people was established, social problems such as subalternity, class elitism, and religious struggles still existed. Philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa suggested that the mestizaje form a new identity in order to liberate themselves from the burdens subalternity, class elitism, and religious oppression. She called her idea “The New *Mestiza*,” and fiction author Sandra Cisneros illustrates what a new identity looks like in her works *The House on Mango Street*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, and *Caramelo*. The purpose of this thesis is to examine and expose various social problems and issues that have largely been sidelined or ignored by mainstream academia. Rather than viewing the works of Sandra Cisneros through a Western lens, this thesis turns to philosophers and critics who hail from the Southern Hemisphere and their allies who are trying to promote a positive cultural shift. Examining how the new “*mestiza/mestizo*” creates a new identity and class consciousness that thrives in American, Mexican, and Mexican-American cultures which value light-skinned people and people who have a Spanish lineage is the main objective of this thesis.

스페인인들은 멕시코를 식민지화 한 후 그들의 교육과 종교를 통해 멕시코에 대한 문화적 지배를 확립했다. 토착 원주민과 스페인 사람들의 결혼으로 인해 *mestizaje* 라고 불리는 새로운 인종이 나타났다. 이러한 새로운 인종의 출현에도 불구하고 서발터너티, 계급 엘리트주의, 종교적 투쟁과 같은 사회적 문제들이 여전히 존재했다. 이러한 문제와 싸우기 위해 철학자인 Gloria Anzaldúa는 *mestizaje* 들로 하여금 새로운 정체성을 확립할 것을 제안했다. 그녀는 그 아이디어를 “The New *Mestiza*” 라고 불렀고 소설가인 Sandra Cisneros 는 그녀의 작품 *The House on Mango Street*, *Woman Hollering Creek* 및 *Caramelo* 에서 새로운 정체성이 어떻게 나타나는지 묘사한다. 본 논문의 목적은 주류 학계에서 크게 다루어지지 않거나 무시된 다양한 사회 문제와 이슈들을 조사하고 드러내는 것이다. 이는 서구의 시각을 통해 Sandra Cisneros 의 작품을 살펴보는 것이 아닌, 남반구 유색인들, 그리고 이들의 진정한 동맹자들이라고 할 수 있는 긍정적인 문화적 변화를 시도하는 새로운 철학자들과 비평가들을 연구하는 것이다. 본 논문은 새로운 “*mestiza/mestizo*” 들이 어떻게 새로운 정체성을 창조하여 자신들의 생존뿐만 아니라 기존의 스페인 백인 문화에 대한 편애를 탈피하여 자신들 고유의 문화적 번성을 이루어 낼 것인지를 연구한다.

Chapter One

Introduction: History of the New *Mestiza/Mestizo* and Subalternity in Postcolonial Mexico and the United States

Sandra Cisneros' s writing is often used as an advocative tool to express the opinions and needs for a class of people without a strong political voice. Her novel *The House on Mango Street* is required reading in various school districts in the United States. The novel has especially been targeted for students living in low income environments who struggle with reading and writing due to insufficient government funding for the schools in their neighborhoods. Because Cisneros tends to use simple language, and because she portrays characters who come from similar economic and social backgrounds, students and readers continue to relate to and be inspired by the characters in the stories. Because many of Cisneros' s characters are manifestations of the new *mestiza/mestizo* as theorized by Mexican-American philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa in the work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, I will be using Gloria Anzaldúa as my main theorist for this thesis.

Anzaldúa' s *Borderlands*¹ discusses the problems that arose from the miscegenation among the Spanish, indigenous people of Mexico, and other races which formed a group of people collectively called *mestizos*. In the work, Anzaldúa considers the problems imposed on the indigenous people by the Spanish after the colonization of Mexico, and discusses the oppression Mexican immigrants face once they cross the borders into the United States.

¹ shortened for brevity

However, Anzaldúa's criticisms of oppression are not solely directed at the West. She also considers oppression that exists within her culture toward women, men, and disenfranchised members of Mexican-American society (such as homosexuals).

Acting as a native informant to empower Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, as well as to educate mainstream Americans, Anzaldúa rewrites history from the perspective of the colonized. She examines Mexico's history, sexual oppression, and religious oppression. Writing from a feminist perspective, Anzaldúa encourages Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to form a new identity and culture that liberates people from cultural subjugation and religious oppression. She wants to create a world where men and women, whites, and non-whites work together in mutual harmony. She writes:

Because I, a *mestiza*
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio,
Estoy norteeda por todas las voces que me hablan
*simultaneamente.*² (77)

Anzaldúa's poem introduces the diaspora Mexicans feel not only when they cross borders into the United States, but the diaspora which arises from the miscegenation of two or more races. She writes about alienated feelings in order to connect with other Mexican-Americans who may be experiencing the same emotions.

The alienation and confusion both mestizos and mestizas experience due to miscegenation is an idea that resonates with Sandra Cisneros. Cisneros's

² my soul is between two worlds, three, four,/ in my head a cacophony of contradictions. I am guided by all of the voices that speak to me simultaneously. (My own translation with help from Cecelia Perez)

characters are often straddling the line between American culture and Mexican culture and also, between Spanish culture and indigenous Mexican culture. When Mexicans and Mexican-Americans inhabit separate cultural spaces, they feel pulled between different values and different languages. Anzaldúa addresses this dilemma that affects Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. She argues, “Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a dark skinned mother listen to?” (78). Rather than accepting the entanglement that ensues over conflicting cultures and expectations, Anzaldúa’s solution is to create a new identity altogether.

The word *mestizo* is a Spanish word that stems from the Latin word “*mixtus*.” It had been used for centuries in Spanish regarding multi-racial people who were made up of two or more races. Before Spain colonized South America, there were *mestizos* living in Spain. They were mixed races of Moors and Spanish, of European gypsies, as well as Middle Eastern inhabitants. Therefore, for hundreds of years there were groups of Spanish people who have been identifying themselves as a *mestizo* or *mestiza*. Often, the *mestizo* and *mestiza* were ostracized from society or treated as second class citizens. Rather than rely on society to define who a person is or what class a person belongs to, Anzaldúa encourages people to create a whole new identity altogether. She calls that identity the new *mestiza/mestizo*. *Borderlands* serves as a manifesto for the new *mestiza/mestizo* and explores the ethical responsibilities of this new culture.

The first chapter of my thesis discusses the colonization of Mexico by the Europeans. At times, Anzaldúa’s written history turns into a polemic against European colonizers. She attributes the loss of ancient Mexican culture to the 16th-century Spanish invasion that was led by Hernan Cortes and supported by greedy Aztec tribes (5). Although she shares the responsibility of “the

Conquest” with indigenous tribes in Mexico, most of her criticism is directed at Europeans. She draws attention to the fact that just 150 years after “the Conquest” there were only one point five million purebreds indigenous Mexicans remaining. From that point, Anzaldúa claims that those first Mexican *mestizos* traveled north into the territory which is now claimed by the United States. Anzaldúa asserts, “The continental intermarriage between Mexican and American Indians created an even greater *mestizaje*” (5). Traveling between the United States and Mexico is part of Mexican culture because the people have always been migratory. Mexican people see no reason to stop centuries of tradition based on the idea that the United States claims land that used to belong to the Mexican people.

Having an awareness about the complex history of the Mexican *mestizaje* is crucial for understanding Anzaldúa’s new *mestizo/mestiza* theory. Knowing that the makeup of the Mexican race has been constantly changing since the time of colonization, and knowing how its people have been traveling north and south of the border dividing The United States and Mexico is pertinent to understanding current migration patterns. British settlers colonized the United States, and over the past three centuries, immigration laws have become more restrictive, but the Mexican culture of migration has stayed the same.

Anzaldúa stresses the fact that what is now identified as Texas used to belong to the Aztecs. Therefore, she justifies illegal immigration into that portion of the United States. According to her, since the United States cheated Mexico out of the land through unfair war and treaties, Mexicans have a cultural birthright to the land. She writes:

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again (55-56).

She expands her argument to say that the natives who occupy the space just north and south of the United States and Mexican border have created a unique culture that has no place in either American or Mexican society. The people born and raised in the borderland are, according to Anzaldúa, made up of “the lifeblood of two worlds merging,” and these people suffer more than those residing in Mexico, or fully integrated Mexican-Americans in American society. These borderland citizens experience the worst of colonization because they are denied financial support from either country.

Socially conscious of the cultural issues present in the borderlands, Sandra Cisneros published her second book *Woman Hollering Creek*, which contains fictional stories of people living in these borderlands. The novel exposes social problems experienced by those living in the borderlands, and also breaks stereotypes of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans living in that cultural space.

Although Anzaldúa claims that the mentality of “belonging nowhere” is unique to those living in the borderlands, many of Cisneros’ s characters endure the same loneliness which stems from their diaspora regardless of their proximity to the borderlands. In *The House on Mango Street*, the narrator, Esperanza Cordova lives in Chicago, but still feels the pangs of not belonging. Although Esperanza longs for Mexico, she chooses to write in English because ultimately she identifies most with American culture. In Cisneros’ s most recent novel, *Caramelo*, both men and women suffer from feelings of being alienated. Distressed by the sense of “belonging nowhere,” the characters in *Caramelo* attempt to resolve their problems through migration, by achieving economic independence, turning toward self-exploration, and reconstructing religious paradigms that were implemented by Spanish-Mexican Catholicism.

Out of all of the social issues the mestiza/mestizo must contend with, directly confronting the Catholic church’ s oppression of the Mexican people

is paramount to creating a new identity. Anzaldúa strongly encourages readers to rebel against antiquated Catholic beliefs and follow a religion that will empower everyone, rather than oppress people. In her chapter, “Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan” Anzaldúa stresses the importance of rebellion of Mexicans. If people genuinely want to be liberated from the white-centered Spanish culture imposed on them, then indigenous Mexicans, mestizos, and mestizas must rebel against the systemic oppression dominated by white culture and perpetuated within Mexican culture. Although the oppression of Mexicans was initially imposed on them by white Spanish culture, that oppression was internalized by indigenous Mexicans, mestizos, and mestizas. Now Mexican culture is responsible for continuing the cycle of oppression. Anzaldúa asserts:

Culture forms our beliefs [. . .] Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture. Culture is made by those in power— men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being [. . .] big mouths, for [. . .] going to visit and gossip with neighbors, for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives? (16)

Women are just as responsible for perpetuating the cycle of oppression towards women by encouraging the violence against women who do not wish to be in traditional roles. In order to end the cycle of violence, women have to teach their children that violence against women is wrong.

In addition to adjusting the role of the women in the family, shifting the role of the man is imperative to creating a more balanced society. According to Anzaldúa, too much responsibility is placed on men to be “providers” rather than nurturers or caretakers. The stress of being solely economically

responsible for a family often alienates the men from the families. They are unable to connect with family members and are subjected to masculine expectations that undermine their overall wellbeing. Anzaldúa claims that part of the reasoning behind the masculine expectations dates back to the Roman Catholic assertion that women need to be protected because of their “carnal” nature. Because a “woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivided, she must be protected. Protected from herself” (17). The responsibility of “protecting women” was unfairly delegated to men. Anzaldúa urges both men and women to break out of these rigidly defined social roles in order to create a balanced and fair social environment.

Breaking out of these rigidly defined social roles is vital to women’s ability to become financially independent. They may choose not to have children; they may choose to forgo marriage in lieu of their careers. Traditionally, women who have chosen the career path over motherhood have been viewed as being selfish. Anzaldúa states:

The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin— as sister, as father, as *padrino*³ — and last as self. In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue (17).

Anzaldúa argues that this selfishness is a necessary component for developing a new *mestiza* identity. Both Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros embraced selfishness by choosing their careers over relationships and family. This trait is something that Cisneros imparts on some of her characters, to prove the point that alternative lifestyles can be just as emotionally, economically, and mentally fulfilling as traditional lifestyles.

One such alternative lifestyle is the rebellion against heteronormative relationships. Currently, socially progressive critics and theorists believe that a

³ godfather

person's heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality is encoded into a person's DNA. However, Anzaldúa claims that she was not born a homosexual, rather she decided to become a homosexual in an act of rebellion against the Catholic Church. She confesses, "I made the choice to be queer (for some it is genetically inherent)" (19). Some may argue then that Anzaldúa was not a true homosexual, but she chose to identify as one for the duration of her life. She writes, "For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two sexual prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality" (19). She hopes that this message will resonate with homosexual men. She argues that a gay man is as much of an outcast from society as a lesbian. When men and women embrace alternative lifestyles, they are rebelling against the patriarchal social system.

Sandra Cisneros addresses homosexual issues in her book *Woman Hollering Creek* by writing a story from a bisexual drag queen's perspective who is dying from AIDS. In *Caramelo*⁴, Cisneros plays around with sexuality more freely by exposing a sexual fluidity that is neither condemned nor ostracized. Cisneros describes the narrator's grandfather as being "neither heterosexual nor homosexual" (155). Her grandfather's lover is also bisexual, and she leaves him for another woman (178). Writing two characters who are explicitly sexually fluid shows Cisneros's growth toward socially progressive ideals. Her normalization of sexual preferences conforms closely to the progressive American idea that sexuality is a non-issue.

In addition to Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of the new *mestiza* and *mestizo*, this thesis also turns to Gayatri Spivak's theories regarding subalternity and post-colonialism in order to explore the social issues presented in the works of Sandra Cisneros. Mainly, Spivak's point that third world subalternity should

⁴ *Caramelo* was written a decade after *Woman Hollering Creek* and addresses homosexuality in the same way that a left-leaning audience would address homosexuality today. It is apparent that within the ten-year gap, Cisneros expanded her understanding of the queer and homosexual community.

not be viewed through a colonizer's lens has urged me to seek out theorists and critics who are either native informants for Mexican and Mexican-American culture, or allies for Mexican and Mexican-American culture. Using the updated version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which can be found in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, this thesis examines the position of subaltern women and men fighting to survive in a post-colonial culture.

Spivak's text allows the reader to examine Cisneros's characters through a non-whitewashed postcolonial lens. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" not only confronts issues regarding the study of the colonized from the perspective of the West, it also demands authentic representation for subaltern classes. Although Spivak's writing focuses on subalterns living in India, it is a valuable source for critiquing subalternity in Cisneros's work. Spivak makes the following disclaimer, "[T]he Indian cannot be taken as representative of all countries, nations, cultures, and the like that may be invoked as Other of Europe as Self" (281). In other words, Spivak wants her audience to acknowledge the nuanced cultural impacts of colonization and imperialism. No two cultures experience subalternity and post-colonialism in the same way, nevertheless, comparisons can be drawn between the Indian subaltern and the Mexican subaltern.

Spivak warns academia of gravitating toward European theorists who claim to be fighting for subaltern classes but in fact are (perhaps ignorantly) expressing their racial and social superiority over those subaltern classes. By viewing the subaltern with a Western perspective, one runs the risk of ignoring the real problems and issues of the subaltern. Using a European theory to discuss the issues of a subaltern usually brings attention back to the West. She writes, "In the event, just as some 'third world women's critics romanticize the united struggle of working-class women, these hegemonic radicals [Deleuze and Foucault] also allow undivided subjectivity to workers'

struggles” (245). Rather than objectifying, romanticizing, or misconstruing the subaltern struggle, Spivak urges academia to listen to the subaltern. Originally, Spivak argued that the subaltern cannot speak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” which was published in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988). Since then, Spivak has changed her stance to say that the subaltern can speak, provided there is a “line” of discourse between the subaltern and political parties which is able to address the needs of the subaltern people (310).

Spivak argues that “Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject” (248). Because western critics are writing out of self-interest, they cannot properly address the issues of the oppressed. What they are doing is diverting attention away from the real problems of oppressed classes back onto themselves. According to Spivak, Subaltern studies are at risk of becoming a two faced operation (147). She has admitted that she herself is responsible for upholding various western sentiments such as the need to educate, mobilize, and empower subaltern women. On one hand, theorists are arguing on behalf of the powerless, but on the other hand, they are forcing their western ideals onto a subaltern culture that may not want or benefit from such western ideals.

Spivak explores this dualism in depth with her discussion of the Indian practice of *Sati*, which is the suicide custom by widows who throw themselves on the pyre of their husband’s corpses. When Great Britain colonized India, they outlawed the custom of *Sati*. Spivak’s issue with the British outlawing *Sati* is not that women should continue to practice suicide because culture demands it, but that the women should have been included in the dialogue as to whether or not the custom should be banned. Spivak resents the fact that women were “effaced” from the conversation. She writes:

If I ask myself, How is it possible to want to die by fire to mourn a husband ritually? I am asking the question of the (gendered) subaltern woman as my subject, not, as my friend Jonathan Culler somewhat tendentiously suggests, trying to ‘produce difference by differing’ or to ‘appeal... to a sexual identity defined as essential and privileging experiences associated with that identity’ (282).

She does not support the practice, but she demands that the voices of the women involved be heard.

In the end, Spivak wishes that women would make the decision to end the suicide custom themselves. She writes:

When a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony. Unless we want to be romantic purists or primitivists about “preserving subalternity”—a contradiction in terms—this is absolutely to be desired. (It goes without saying that museumized or curricularized access to ethnic origin —another battle that must be fought—is not identical with preserving subalternity.) Remembering this allows us to take pride in our work without making missionary claims (310).

In the case where subalterns are working with groups of power, and vice versa, positive change is possible.

Sandra Cisneros believes that people can change and she shows what this change can look like through her character development. She does not believe that subaltern Mexicans and Mexican-Americans cannot rise above their social position. At the same time, she realizes that there needs to be authentic representation for those social classes who do not yet have a voice or those who are unable to see an escape from poverty. Cisneros’ s works attempt to be “a line of communication” between subaltern groups and groups with power. This is illustrated by the fact that her stories featuring subaltern

characters are being taught in the public school system as a means to both inspire and empower disadvantaged students. Rather than being restricted to stories revolving around the needs of the subaltern, Cisneros presents stories of subalterns who rise above their subalternity and achieve financial independence.

Chapter Two

Rewriting Masculinity: A *New Mestizo* Look Into Cisneros' s Male Characters

“We need a new masculinity and the new man needs a movement.”

-- Gloria E. Anzaldúa

Cisneros' s feminist ideology considers the struggles of both women and men as each character must deal with gender, class, and social issues. This chapter focuses on the struggles of the men in her novels *The House on Mango Street*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, and *Caramelo*. In many cases, the outcome of the characters is either tragic or horrific: two of the men die, one man turns to homicide and lust in a move to counterbalance social injustice, and other men suffer wounds that haunt them for the rest of their lives. These male characters do not have the same “happy ending” as many of the women in Cisneros' s novels. Regardless of whether or not these men actually survive their situations, each man is fighting to the core for their survival. The struggles that men face are different from the struggles that women face, because men contend with social pressure to be strong providers. The expectation for men to become the sole provider for their family is often thwarted by racial exclusivity, and in the case of one homosexual, is punished with AIDS as a result of his deviation from the social norm. The problems that each man face are different from each other, so the following chapter is divided up into separated character studies.

The Mango Street Men

The vignettes in Cisneros' s *House on Mango Street* are so short that often one misses the contents completely. Most of the articles addressing *The House on Mango Street* focus on the narrator' s age, voice, and progression from a low class Mexican-American to middle-class by becoming a successful published author. Critics are reluctant to research the subject of masculinity within Cisneros' s novel. Viewing her novel from a feminist perspective, critics tend to dismiss the male characters and choose to discuss the lives and stories of the female characters. Limited by the scope of the research, problems affecting men such as post-colonial expectations and immigration struggles are rarely addressed in depth. With each subsequent novel, Cisneros continually elaborates on the problems which are specific to men; it is therefore interesting to see the growth of these ideas from one book to the next.

Because Cisneros' s first novel focuses on the growth of the narrator Esperanza Cordero, the developments of her male characters go overlooked by many critics. Beth L. Brunk, author of "*En Otras Vocas: Multiple Voices in Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street*" points out that "The men of Mango Street are strictly described from a limited point of view as if they do not have feelings or as if those feelings are simply not accessible to Esperanza" (145). Most of the critics involved with *The House on Mango Street* do not even mention the men, save for Esperanza' s father who seems to fit the trope of a Mexican father. Brunk' s description subverts attention away from the masculine issues presented in *The House on Mango Street*.

The nature of *The House on Mango Street* was meant to be poetic. Literary critic Robin Ganz makes this clear by recounting a well-known interview between Sandra Cisneros and Aranda Pilar E. Rodriguez. Ganz states:

In that moment she realized that she had something to write about that her classmates had not experienced and would probably never be able to articulate with the understanding that she possessed. Cisneros recounts that, ‘this is how *The House on Mango Street* was born, the child-voice that was to speak all my poems for many years (63-64)’ ” (24).

The audience should read Cisneros’ s vignettes closely to recognize social problems that affect her male characters. Two stories in particular record the difficulties that the illegal immigrant man and the Mexican-American man face while living in the United States. “Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin” addresses the arrest of a man who steals a car, and “Geraldo No Last Name” discusses the death of an illegal immigrant. These stories reveal injustices within the American legal and welfare system toward Mexican and Mexican-American men are trying to improve their lives in the face of adversity.

In “Louie, His Cousin & His Other Cousin,” Esperanza recounts a memory of when a young man from the neighborhood steals a yellow Cadillac, most likely an Eldorado model, as those were some of the most expensive models during the 1960s. The 1960s model in particular was known for having extra space. The brochure specifically states that the 1968 model has an “unusual amount of leg space” (15). In the vignette, Louie’ s cousin:

drove up [in the alley where the kids were playing] in this great big yellow Cadillac with whitewalls and a yellow scarf tied around the mirror. Louie’ s cousin had his arm out the window. He honked a couple of times and a lot of faces looked out from Louie’ s back window and then a lot of people came out— Louie, Marin and all the little sisters. (24)

The car is big enough to fit everybody with seats “big and soft like a sofa.” The family and friend joyride around the block seven times until the police show up and arrest Louie’ s cousin.

In this vignette, the narrator acts as if she does not know the name of Louie's cousin, but because the community in the neighborhood is close-knit, this is probably not the case. By not identifying the name of the car thief, Esperanza is protecting the young man from carrying the shameful label of car thief. The audience knows Louie, but they do not know the name of Louie's cousin who stole the car.

Although the cousin who gets arrested for stealing a car remains nameless, the material has enough interesting details to merit a close study. The young man steals an "Eldorado," which was named after the mythical South American city "El Dorado." Part of the reason why Spain colonized South America was to find this mythical city. The name "Eldorado" was meant to symbolize an exotic luxury that few could afford. One of the only fully automatic cars on the market during the 1960s, the Eldorado was one of the most expensive cars on the market and was regarded as a wonder in technological advancement. Esperanza makes a point to note this car's special developments:

The windows didn't roll up like in ordinary cars. Instead there was a button that did it for you automatically. We rode up and down the block six times, but Louie's cousin said he was going to make us walk home if we didn't stop playing with the windows or touching the FM radio." (24)

By stealing this American car with a culturally appropriated name, Louie's cousin is embracing the American culture without losing sight of his Spanish heritage. For a moment, this young man drives around family and friends in a car that society will not let them afford. The car has a Spanish name that belongs to his culture rather than American culture. By taking the car momentarily, the young man is fighting against an unfair system. It is as if he is subconsciously saying the car belongs to his people and that his people deserve to have luxurious things. Cisneros's depiction of the inner city

directly mirrors the lives of the youth living in the barrio. With just a few sentences, she manages to convey to the audience how difficult it is for those who live in the city.

Esperanza makes the point that she only met Louie's cousin one time. It is implied that after he got arrested for stealing the Cadillac, he never returned to Mango Street. There are no definitive answers which tell the audience what happened to Louie's cousin, but readers may conclude the following deductions. It could be that Louie was living in the United States illegally, and after being arrested and convicted on a grand theft auto count, that he would be sent back to Mexico for further punishment. The other deduction is that Louie's cousin was legally residing in the United States, but due to the rampant racism within the court system, he received a much longer sentence for stealing a car than a sentence that his white counterparts would receive.

On a more subtle note, Louie's cousin's act was self-sacrificial in that it teaches the children a lesson they could not yet comprehend. If he was part of a gang, the car should have gone to the gang boss right away for redistribution. Hot cars need to be sold right away; the thieves of stolen cars know there is no time for joyriding. He should not have stopped off at his family's house in order to give his cousins and friends a taste of privileged white America. Yet, he did stop. He made sure that every one of his cousins had the chance to ride in a big, comfortable, expensive car. The story is almost reminiscent of Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" in which the children visit FAO Schwartz in New York City. In that story, the children cannot afford anything in the toy store, and yet the experience begs the question, "Who are these people that spend that much for performing clowns and \$1,000 for toy sailboats? What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain't in on it?" (3). In this story, the children realize that in order to have luxurious things, they have to rise out of the poverty in which they seem to be entrapped. Likewise, the children from Mango Street

who will grow into adults must either learn how to earn the money for themselves if they want those luxurious things, or they can risk jail time or deportation by stealing them.

By not revealing the true identity of the car thief, Esperanza is protecting the people in her neighborhood. It sends the message that even if people resort to crime, neighbors will try to protect each other. In the inner city, when it comes to crime, ignorance is the best card to play in protecting the guilty. There's no judgment from Esperanza's end because she is part of that community, and she will protect those within it.

Possibly not wanting to be guilty of typecasting men into criminal roles, Cisneros recounts "Geraldo No Last Name," a hardworking illegal immigrant with a zest for life. A victim of a reckless hit-and-run accident, Geraldo bleeds out on a hospital gurney, and the only person around to mourn his death is Marin, the young man's lover. The story is mentioned a few different times in various places.

Researcher Fiona Hartely-Kroeger briefly examines this vignette in her article, "Silent Speech: Narration, Gender and Intersubjectivity in Two Young Adult Novels." In this article, Hartley-Kroeger acknowledges Esperanza's sympathy for Geraldo, but attributes this sympathy to a projection of Esperanza's own burning desire to leave Mango Street. She writes:

Esperanza has a moment of reflection for Geraldo, perhaps because he left his hometown as she so longs to do. Their common goal of escape forges a connection, a kind of sympathy; it is close to the kind of intersubjectivity that Esperanza's spectatorship affords other female characters (285).

The author offers a few other insights into the text and quickly shifts the focus back to Esperanza's growth into an adult and a writer. Author Leslie S. Gutierrez-Jones argues that Esperanza's point of view is more than merely a "spectatorship." She writes, "Esperanza speaks for the excluded,

in Certeau's terms 'the various forms of non-labor': the sickly, the deranged, the abused, the anonymous dead and the disempowered [. . .] (307). Gutierrez-Jones's interpretation of the text is persuasive. Although Esperanza sounds young and naive when she recounts the death of Geraldo, she is most likely being sardonic toward an American culture which undervalues immigrants. Esperanza asks:

But what difference does it make? He wasn't anything to her. He wasn't her boyfriend or anything like that. Just another *brazier* who didn't speak English. Just another wetback⁵. You know the kind. The ones who always look ashamed. And what was she doing out at three a.m. anyway? Marin who was sent home with her coat and some aspirin. How does she explain? (66).

Esperanza is not dismissing Geraldo's death at all; her sardonic attitude actually functions to bring attention to immigrants living in the United States who lack a social support system for catastrophic accidents and life-changing events.

Geraldo was not "just another wetback". He was a hardworking man who was trying to provide for his family. He was a dancer who enjoyed life. In her question, "What does it matter?" there is deep sorrow, not just for Geraldo, but for the thousands of other immigrants who wind up just like Geraldo. Their district hospital was grossly underfunded and completely incapable of handling any kind of emergencies. Esperanza exposes the underfunded hospital conditions when discussing the death of Geraldo, "Nobody but an intern working all alone. And maybe if the surgeon would've come, maybe if he hadn't lost so much blood, if the surgeon had only come, they would know who to notify and where" (66). There may have been a surgeon in the hospital, but Geraldo was of the lowest priority

⁵ [W]etbacks are "undocumented workers, illegal immigrants from Mexico and parts South" (Anzaldúa 128)

because he had no identification, insurance, or money to pay the bill. Geraldo's death is far more significant because it represents an ugly truth about the American social and healthcare system which ignores unwelcome members of its society.

He was not "just another wetback." He was a young man who was trying to give his family a better life in Mexico. He was a migrant worker who chose to work at cash paying jobs. He probably moved around so much that he did not have time to make many deep and meaningful connections with others around him. Marin knew this fact but chose him as her dance partner anyway. With both parties fully realizing the temporality of their relationship, the bond between them could have quickly intensified emotionally in a subconscious attempt to make up for the time together that they knew they did not have. Marin knows Geraldo as a great dancer and probable lover, but she is ignorant of the more personal details of his life, including how many places Geraldo has lived in, how many different jobs he had taken, or what he did with the money he earned from those jobs. Cisneros's voice becomes observable through Esperanza's narration, as the story switches from a first-person point of view to an omniscient point of view. She writes, "They never saw the kitchenettes. They never knew about the two-room flats and sleeping rooms he rented, the weekly money orders sent home, the currency exchange. How could they?" (66). In this paragraph, every living space is pluralized: kitchenettes, two-room flats, sleeping rooms. Each space tiny and temporary. This subpar standard of living is atypical for Mexicans living in Mexico. In *Caramelo*, Sandra Cisneros shows the audience how many families in Mexico during the 20th Century were middle-class— especially if they were from Spanish descent. Middle-class families of Spanish descent had live-in servants, feasts, modernity, and television stars. On the south side of the border, Mexican lives looked very similar to American lives.

When middle-class Mexicans moved to America, they were shocked and

appalled at the living conditions in which they were forced to live. America seemed dirty in comparison to Mexico, where people washed their feet before walking in a house, and food was carefully prepared in a sterilized kitchen. They were shocked when they moved to America because suddenly they were treated as second class citizens. When Esperanza says, “Just another wetback. You know the kind. The ones who always look ashamed,” she is discussing the shame that many Mexican immigrants feel when they have to live as second class citizens in dilapidated homes. If they send letters back home, how are they to explain with pride the situations in which they live?

The only time Geraldo can relieve his stress and ignore his class problems is by dancing in the middle of the night. For a moment, Geraldo experiences exciting music and matching dances. With Marin as his dance partner, he can savor the moments before he must return to work. Esperanza lists the dances that Geraldo and Marin practiced: “Uptown. Logan. Embassy. Palmer. Aragon. Fontana. [. . .] *cumbias* and *salsas* and *rancheras* even” (65). These dances are the place where young adults can embrace the fun parts of various cultures. By learning the American, European, and Mexican dances, they are embracing a cosmopolitan life that encompasses all cultures. Rather than dancing only Spanish dances, Geraldo tries to learn all the dances, thus emulating American culture and European culture.

Woman Hollering Creek Men

“Tristán”

Gloria Anzaldúa boldly proclaims in *Borderlands*: “Men, even more than women, are fettered to gender roles. Women at least have had the guts to break out of bondage. Only gay men have had the courage to expose themselves to the woman inside them and to challenge the current masculinity (84). Having the opinion that every person has both feminine and masculine

traits, Anzaldúa celebrates the man who can openly flaunt his idealistic feminine character traits. This is an idea that Cisneros develops in her novel *Woman Hollering Creek*.

However, Cisneros' s queer representation in the novel is not completely unproblematic. For decades, Critics have emphasized the need for queer representation within literature as a means to fight the oppression and stigmas attached to queer and homosexual communities. It is generally agreed that the more queer and homosexual characters appear in literature, film, music, and art, the more the public will accept homosexual behavior as normal. The hope is that in time the stigmas that come with being seen as a homosexual or queer will disappear. However, Amy Villarejo argues that the representation of queer and homosexual people have been boxed into two categories. She writes in, "Materiality, Pedagogy, and the Limits of Queer Visibility" that the public generally wants to see "negative" images of the queer or homosexual. She argues that in the 1990s, "positive portraits of gay people frequently meant sanitized, desexualized, normative, whitened, lightened, or otherwise well-behaved folks accommodating to a liberal embrace" (390). The comedian Ellen Degeneras has often been accused of being a whitewashed representation of the homosexual population. According to Villarejo, the gay community and its supporters were disappointed with this kind of representation. She argues:

Some of our desires did not correspond neatly with the liberal imagination: some of us delighted as much or more in 'negative' representations — nasty sex and butch boys and nelly queens and other delicious inheritances of queer culture that disrupt normative requirements and expectations." (390)

Cisneros panders to this latter audience with her short story, "Remember the Alamo" where the main character, a flamboyant drag queen slowly dies from AIDS.

“Remember the Alamo” is different from Cisneros’s other stories because it is a story told directly through a man’s voice. In the beginning, Cisneros seems to be giving Tristán a positive voice, one that queer people could relate to and respect. Writing in the third person, Rudy refers to himself as his drag queen persona, a woman named Tristán: “Tristán holds himself⁶ like a matador. His clothes magnificent. Absolutely perfect, like a second skin. The crowd throbbing— Tris-TAN, Tris-TAN, Tris-TAN!!! Tristán smiles, the room shivers. He raises his arms, the wings of a hawk. Spotlight clean as the moon of Andalucía. Audience breathless as water” (64). The audience believes that Tristán is a phenomenal showman. The text goes on to point how even his family is proud of him: “At first his father said What’s this? But then when the newspaper articles started pouring in, well, what could do but send photocopies to the relatives in Mexico, right?” (65). He seems to be changing the stereotype against gays within the Mexican community because he is successful at his job. Ignoring the traditional role for men to father many children and support a large family, Tristán chooses a path that makes him happy.

As Tristán embraces *the new mestiza* attitude, he simultaneously abandons the hegemonic masculinity that was put into place through years of patriarchal conditioning. By adopting not only a bold new persona but also choosing to identify as female, Tristán sets an example for other internally conflicted people who may also identify as a non-cis gendered person. Being transgendered seems to be in opposition to traditional Mexican culture; however, Tristán continues to embrace parts of the Mexican culture that resonate with him. By performing traditional Mexican dances (“Flamenco, salsa, tango, Fandango, merengue, Cumbria, cha-cha-chá) and performing right behind the Alamo where the Mexican-American war had been fought,

⁶ Sandra Cisneros is probably using the masculine pronoun for Tristán because in the 90s it was still acceptable to give heteronormative pronouns to people based on their assigned gender at birth. Had this story been written today, Rudy would probably use feminine pronouns when referring to Tristán.

and by performing all of this in a gay nightclub, Tristán is embracing the parts of culture that he wants to embrace. There is not yet a label for him because he is making it up as he goes along. According to Gloria Anzaldúa, this confident and joyous attitude is exactly what will refresh and rejuvenate the Latino race. Tristán's family including his mother, father, sisters, and extended relatives are proud of him.

This unique queer voice could have been the type of representation that the LGBTQ community needed to hear from, but then the audience realizes that Tristán is dying of AIDS. Just as there needs to be queer and homosexual representation in literature, there also needs to be AIDS representation as well. However, confining the disease to the homosexual communities does nothing to help spread awareness or cultivate an understanding of the way the disease works. Susan Sontag writes extensively on the issue in her book, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, where she lambasts Western society insistence on confining the AIDS virus to “at risk” communities. She argues that, “[t]he unsafe behavior that produces AIDS is judged to be more than just weakness. It is indulgence, delinquency—addiction to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant” (25). Sontag furthermore criticizes the medical communities and political propaganda for spreading false information regarding how the disease can be contracted, how the disease works in the body, and how the disease progresses over the years. She accuses the public's understanding of AIDS of being “premodern” because of the common belief that the disease is mainly contracted by “members of a ‘risk group.’ ” Sontag rebukes the words ‘risk group’ by calling it a “neutral-sounding, bureaucratic category which also revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness had judged” (46). Due to the false information spread about AIDS, the public developed prejudices against gay men. Homosexuals are not the only people who contract AIDS, but by writing stories about cross-dressing gay men who subsequently die of AIDS

continues to perpetuate a misunderstanding of not only how the disease works and spreads, but also of homosexual and queer people as well.

One critic has something positive to say about the representation of an AIDS carrier in the Latino community. Harryette Mullen⁷ discusses the importance of including a character suffering from AIDS in Cisneros' s short story "Remember the Alamo." Mullen writes:

[T]he juxtaposition of a gay night club with perhaps the most famous Texas tourist site constructs a metonymical association of icons memorializing the massacre of celebrated heroes of Texas history on the one hand, and, on the other hand, obscure individuals who have died of AIDS during the on-going epidemic of our own time. This juxtaposition further comments on the silencing of Mexicans in standard Texas histories as well as the silencing of linguistic and racial minorities in public discourses generated in the battle against the deadly virus. (6)

While there needs to be representation for AIDS characters within literature, the representation of HIV carriers must be fair. The characters should be relatable so that the public can more easily identify with people who have AIDS. While there should be discussions about the disease, having a homosexual drag queen who is suffering terribly from AIDS is probably not the best kind of representation that the AIDS community wants or needs. Cisneros makes it a point to express the gruesome side of AIDS by mentioning the "ulcers" , "hospital bills" , "bloody sheets" , "pubic hairs in the sink" and "the muddy spittle in the toilet that you don' t want to remember" (66-67). These haunting images feed into the public stereotype of what it is like to have AIDS.

There has been other Chicano literature depicting the HIV virus' s attack on the homosexual community. Mexican-American author Mario Bellatin offers a similar story in his award-winning novella *Beauty Salon*. In this novella, a

⁷ Mullen, Harryette "A Silence Between Us Like Language": the Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*

cross-dressing homosexual relates to the audience what it feels like to be dying of AIDS. He also reveals to the audience that many gay Chicanos are also dying of AIDS but are shunned from the medical community.

The man in *Beauty Salon* chooses to remain anonymous and only refers to himself as “I.” Perhaps it is the anonymity of the narrator that makes him more relatable to a cisgendered audience. Through his anonymity, the narrator is able to clearly relate to the audience the tragedy and horror of a medically underfunded community that is being ravaged by the HIV virus. Instead of focusing on the narrator as a flamboyant cross-dressing homosexual, the audience is able to listen to his story and understand the injustices of Chicanos who are suffering from HIV and AIDS.

Before the narrator discovers he has AIDS, he is a symbol of the immigrant’s American Dream. Working hard and saving up money, the narrator opens his own beauty salon by the age of twenty-two. Within a couple of years after opening, his salon became a first class establishment. In spite of the fact that his shop was famous for doing the makeup and hair for famous beauty pageant contestants, the *Beauty Salon* owner remains constantly shamed of his desire to dress up in women’s clothes (15). When he goes across town, he dresses in men’s clothes. He purposely bought land far away from “any public transportation” in order to be accessible only to people who really wanted to go to that salon (13). Throughout the novella, the narrator lives in fear of gangs who prey on those in the homosexual community. When hospitals in the vicinity turn AIDS patients away, the narrator converts his salon into the “Terminal,” which is his name for “a communal place to die” (13). He reminisces about the past, where he danced as a drag queen and “cruised” for men in homosexual bathhouses (10-11). The narrator in *Beauty Salon* comes across as being more relatable to a cisgendered audience because even though he is succumbing to AIDS, he is actively trying to help other people.

I sold the hair dryers and the reclining armchairs I used to was hair in order to obtain the things I needed for the new phase of the beauty salon. With the money I made from the sale of all the old things I bought mattresses, iron cots, and a kerosene cooker. I made the difficult decision to get rid of one very important element, that is, the mirrors, whose reflection had multiplied both the aquariums and the transformation of the clients as they underwent their beauty treatments. I feel that, despite the fact that I’ m getting used to the way this place looks now, infinitely multiplying the suffering, as mirrors facing each other tend to do in such a strange way, would be too much for anyone here to handle. (11-12)

The narrator in *Beauty Salon* sets a positive example for the queer community because he is focused and goal oriented. He has accomplished his original goal of creating and maintaining a successful beauty salon, and he is also successful in the creation of his “Terminal.” While this story is more relatable to a cisgendered audience, the narrative still falls into the stereotype that Susan Sontag mentions in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. Ultimately, *Beauty Salon* is the narrative of a homosexual drag queen dying of AIDS.

Even though both the beauty salon owner and Tristán are attempts at setting a positive example for the queer Latino community, the examples are undermined by the fact that both men have AIDS. This adds to the stigmas attached to being queer, homosexual, and/or being a person afflicted with AIDS. On the other hand, having a story featuring a homosexual dying from AIDS also gives a platform and voice to a person in society who may not otherwise have one.

“Rogelio Velasco” and “Flavio Munguia”

Code-switching, a linguistic term defined as “the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation” ,

plays a pertinent role in understanding the characters Rogelio Velasco and Flavio Munguia of Cisneros' s short stories "Tin Tan Tan" and "Bien Pretty." In these short stories, not only does the writing vacillate between Spanish and English, but the names defining the characters change as well. Understanding that both Rogelio Velasco and Flavio Munguia are indeed the same man allows the reader to develop a deeper appreciation of this complicated male figure. Rogelio Velasco/Flavio Munguia represent what Spivak would call "the silent, silenced center" who represent "the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (283). While Rogelio Velasco/Flavio Munguia is not illiterate, he does represent the lowest class of working immigrants within the United States. Rafael Perez-Torres writes in his book, *Movements in Chicano Poetry*:

Code-switching among Spanish, English, and the vernacular is a common means of expression used by multilingual speakers, a verbal strategy for conveying such information as sociopolitical identity and economic position. This particular speech-act establishes or reinforces social roles, and aids or precludes the construction of bonds and relations. Within the discourse of Chicano aesthetics, it becomes involved in a complex strategy of formal experimentation, political commentary, and empowering representations. (16)

Torres' s observations on the use of code-switching may help explain Cisneros' s use of code-switching. Although Rogelio Velasco and Flavio Munguia have totally different names that are completely unrelated in Spanish, both men are one and the same. These two names indeed "reinforce social roles" as well as "establish" new roles for a mestizo. In regards to Cisneros' s tendency to give her characters multiple names, Harryette Mullens writes:

Thus, names and the process of naming, for individuals as well as communities, are thus fundamental to Cisneros's attempt to produce a

culturally representative yet open and polysemous text. Names, especially nicknames, and intimate forms of address, often diminutives, which circulate in private, usually oral, discourses operate in a similar way as insider codes in her stories. (7)

For monolingual readers, the disorienting effect of code-switching not only between Spanish and English as well as switching between names serves the purpose of revealing the characters' socioeconomic and cultural position. Because Flavio Munguia writes in English so well, the audience may deduce that his from a higher class than the stereotypical immigrant. His command of the English language points toward an earlier education that emphasized the need to learn English at a native-speaker's level. It is mentioned that his family's wish was for him to have a job where he could "keep his hands clean" while he was working in the United States (146). This desire for their son to work in a clean falls in line with middle class ideals rather than low or subaltern classes in Mexico. The fact that the narrator claims Munguia's family was "so poor" is probably due to her American stereotype of Mexico.

In "Tin Tan Tan," Flavio Munguia uses the pen name Rogelio Velasco to write an acrostic in English. The acrostic spells out the name of the lover who supposedly spurned him: Lupita. Throughout the poetic prose, Velasco reveals partial truths about himself in English. Truths which include, "I have the misfortune of being both poor and without your affection," and "Perhaps the pure love I had to offer wasn't enough, and another now is savoring your honeyed nectar. But none will love you so honorably and true as the way Rogelio Velasco loved you" (132-133). To the monolingual reader, Rogelio Velasco appears to be a subaltern man who is spurned by his lover because he is unable to financially provide for her.

However, this lamentation written in English is only the first layer of the story that Cisneros wants to tell. The epigraph preceding Velasco's acrostic

is written in Spanish, a language inaccessible to the monolingual reader. Buried within this text, is another truth pertinent to understanding the male character that Cisneros builds:

*Me abandonaste, mujer, porque soy muy pobre
Y por tener la desgracia de ser casado.
Que voy hacer si yo soy el abandonado,
Abandonado sea por el amor de Dios.*
- “El Abandonado” (135)

This piece of writing is taken from a famous Mexican folk song which has been sung by dozens of singers. Translated⁸ into English it reads:

You abandoned me, woman because I am too poor,
And because I have the misfortune of being married.
What am I going to do if I am the abandoned?
Abandoned for the love of God?
-The Abandoned Man (135)

The epigraph, unintelligible to the monolingual reader, points toward an untrustworthy character who tells the truth about himself only in Spanish. The monolingual reader may read the epigraph sentimentally without going through the trouble to translate it. On the other hand, a bilingual speaker of Spanish and English would catch onto the irony that because Velasco is a married man, he cannot marry Lupita. It can be deduced that the real problem is Velasco’s infidelity and not his financial status that upended their relationship.

This code-switching between Spanish and English points toward a collective consciousness that chooses to protect the more vulnerable parts of oneself by using Spanish. The name “Rogelio Velasco” may not even be the speaker’s real name. He may be hiding his true self by choosing an alternate name in order to gain sympathy from the reader. That the acrostic

⁸ Translation by Cecilia Perez

is a type of poetry-prose could be a way of seducing future women to fall in love with him as well. Women may be attracted to his command over language and sensitive persona. They may want to take the place of Lupita so that they can receive the intense love that Velasco has for Lupita.

“LUPITA” is the name spelled out in the acrostic. Velasco writes, “Until death do us part, said your eyes, but not your heart. All, all illusion. A caprice of your flirtatious woman’s soul” (135). It is interesting that in “Tin Tan Tan” the author chooses to lie in English. The lie, told in English, works as a quiet social protest against the society which continually tries to suppress Mexican immigrants, Mexican-Americans, and other non-white people.

Possibly to mock the Americans who have the stereotype of Mexicans as being poor low class citizens, Flavio Munguia seduces and breaks the hearts of those who feel they are superior to him. When the opportunity presents himself to become a model, Munguia accepts the position with a subtle sense of pride. In “Bien Pretty,” the narrator, who initially sees herself superior to Flavio Munguia, writes, “Flavio Munguia was just ordinary Flavio until he met me. I filled up his head with a million and one *cariñitos*. Then he was ruined forever. [. . .] Once you tell a man he’s pretty, there’s no taking it back” (137). Adopting both the role of the poet and model subverts attention away from the fact that Munguia’s day job is a bug exterminator. Choosing to identify as a poet and a model could be Velasco’s *rasquache* protest against a social system that attempts to confine Mexican immigrants into the lower class of society. Ybarra-Frausto discusses different forms of social protest in his essay, “*Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility.*” He writes:

To be *rasquache* is to posit a bawdy, spunky consciousness seeking to subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down— a witty, irreverent and impertinent posture that records and moves outside established boundaries.” (5)

That Velasco establishes himself as a poet directly contradicts the stereotype

of the dirty Mexican wetback. Velasco gives hints to his occupation as a bug exterminator all the while trying to reclaim his spot as Lupita's lover when he announces that, "Perhaps I can exterminate the pests of doubt that infest your house. Perhaps the pure love I had to offer wasn't enough, and another now is savoring your honeyed nectar" (136). Rather than choosing to be labeled as a pest exterminator, Velasco chooses to be seen as a poet who is not only dedicating a poem to his lover Lupita but is also prostrating himself before the reader as a spurned, abandoned man.

Velasco displays his feigned sensitivity in lines that are probably meant to seduce more women. He probably realizes that coming across as a spurned man, he will receive more positive attention from women. He writes, "No, no, I can't conceive I won't receive your precious lips again. My eyes are tired of weeping, my heart of beating" (136). These sentimental and hyperbolic lines are clearly "outside established boundaries" of the stereotype of a pest exterminator. In spite of the fact that the narrator is already married to another, the language of the poem "Lupita" as expressed by Thomas Ybarro-Frausto embraces "[a]n attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful at stance and style" (5). His choice to use English as the medium to express his woes poetically clearly shows his mastery of the English language. He could have written the poem in Spanish, as the epigraph suggests, but rather chooses to use English.

There could possibly be some ulterior motives for writing in English as well. As established before, the man is not single, yet choosing English as the language in which he can lie, albeit beautifully, gives clues to the writer's stance on the trustworthiness of English speakers. Cisneros writes in *Caramelo*, "Spanish [is] the language to speak to God and English the language to talk to dogs" (208). The narrator claims the adage to be an old Mexican proverb. That the man is writing in English suggests that not only is his admonition of love insincere, but it is a language that can only fool a

monolingual speaker. The epigraph preceding the acrostic mentions the Spanish equivalent of the word “abandoned” four times in grammatical forms “abandonaste” and “abandonado.” The Spanish words and English words are similar enough to each other that even the most basic literate reader can determine the epigraph to be about a man who was abandoned. Because it is mentioned several times, even the monolingual English reader may feel they have the gist of the song, but only a bilingual reader will immediately appreciate the irony of “Tin Tan Tan.”

The truth about “Rogelio Velasco” is revealed entirely through the short story “Bien Pretty” which is written by Lupe, also known as Lupita. “Bien Pretty” is a short story from a woman who is revealed to be a middle-class Mexican-American artist. While living in the borderlands in Texas, she falls in love with a bug exterminator because she feels that his face embodies the spirit of a forgotten Mexican past—the myth of “Aztlán.” She convinces the man to become a portrait model for a piece she is working on featuring the love between Prince Popocatepetl and Princess Ixtaccihautl which of course is the myth behind naming the famous volcano and mountain in central Mexico. Lupe is obsessed with Flavio Munguia, because of the way that he looked. She believes him to be “the Prince Popo I’ve been waiting for with that face of a sleeping Olmec, the heavy Oriental eyes, the thick lips and wide nose, that profile carved from onyx” (144). After much begging, Munguia agrees to be her portrait model to pose as Prince Popocatepetl.

Reminiscing their relationship, Lupe writes: “Flavio. He wrote poems and signed them “Rogelio Velasco.” And maybe I would still be in love with him if he wasn’t already married to two women, one in Tampico and the other in Matamoros” (138). The truth is shocking only to monolingual speakers of English who did not take the time to decipher the meaning of the epigraph in “Tin Tan Tan.”

Although Rogelio Velasco/Flavio Munguia is a flawed character, it is important to appreciate the talents of this bilingual writer. In “Tin Tan Tan” the audience read his acrostic poem lamenting the loss of his lover Lupita. In “Bien Pretty,” the audience can see his talents at writing advertisements. Mullens suggests that Munguia’s writing talents are what attracted Lupe to him in the first place. His cockroach advertisement uses literary embellishments to attract customers. Being a literate poet plays an important role in Flavio Munguia’s personal identity.

Mullens links Munguia’s literary abilities along with Lupe’s artistic talents shaping a cultural perception of what the inside of a Mexican barrio is like. She claims that art is a major part of the Mexican barrio. She writes, “Flavio represents the indigenous creativity and cultural ‘authenticity’ of the barrio, on which the trained artist relies for inspiration” (14). Munguia’s poetic creativity works to break the stereotypes about male Mexican immigrants living in the United States. The men are much more than proletariat workers discontented in their professions.

Crossing the border into the United States, an act of bravery for many Mexicans does not necessarily open up economic doors or ensure an upgraded standard of living. In most cases, the standard of living dramatically decreases as the immigrants have to contend with language barriers, racism, and an American nationalism which all work against the immigrant. Flavio Munguia’s family, aware of the different types of oppression Flavio faces on the opposite side of the border, merely wish he can “find a job where he would keep his hands clean” (146). Cisneros exposes the difficulties Flavio Munguia faced working in the United States as he bounces between various menial jobs which included dishwashing, shrimp shelling, factory working, and farm working. Eventually, Munguia works for himself being a freelance pest controller a job where :

Even if the poisons and insecticides gave him headaches, [and] even if he had to crawl under the house and occasionally rinse his hair with a garden hose [. . .]” it was still “better than having to keep your hands all day in soapy water like a woman, only he used the word *vejja*⁹ which is worse.” (147)

Cisneros’ s inclusion of Flavio Munguia’ s working history within the United States reveals the struggle immigrants face when trying to find a career. Most of the jobs listed on Munguia’ s resume are confined to unskilled labor positions that may also have poor working conditions. Being a pest controller is a step up from the other menial jobs for two reasons: the job allows him to work for himself, and it allows him the free time to flaunt his bilingualism, as he writes both poetry and advertisements in English.

Chato

The last male character from Cisneros’ s *Woman Hollering Creek* that I am going to discuss is a pedophile and serial killer named Chato, “which means fat face” in Spanish (33). Chato represents a class of nationalistic Mexicans who were obsessed with “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan” (Perez-Torres 62). These Mexican nationalists wanted to erase their Mestizo identities and create a whole new identity based entirely on the indigenous history of Mexico. Perez-Torres writes that, “[t]he affirmation of a glorious past becomes the condemnation of a repressive present” (62). This idea of a “repressive present” is a notion that Spivak covers in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” She writes:

The contemporary division of labor is a displacement of the divided field of nineteenth-century territorial imperialism. Put simply, a group of countries, generally first-world, are in the position of investing capital;

⁹ a slanderous term for elderly women

another group, generally third-world, provide the field for investment, both through the comparator indigenous capitalists and through their ill-protected and shifting labor force. (287)

Of course, Spivak is referring specifically to the colonization of India in the text, which happened in the eighteenth century. Colonization of Mexico happened much earlier, but still at the hand of a European country (Spain) and had a helping hand by the “indigenous capitalists” at the time. “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan” was more than just an idea or a physical place. According to Perez-Torres, “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan” was a nationalistic strive to eradicate any traces of European influence on the Mexican people. Ultimately, the plan failed, but it exposed the need for a rewritten history and the need for a proud and independent cultural identity.

In *Woman Hollering Creek*, Chato represents a character who was probably angry at the systemic violence against the indigenous people of Mexico. The narrator writes about him, “He was born on a street with no name in a town called Miseria. His father, Eusebio, is a knife sharpener. His mother, Refugio, stacks apricots into pyramids and sells them on a cloth in the market.” Although the narrator says, “There was no Mayan blood” (33) she also describes him as a “dark Indian one,” so he must have come from a line of indigenous people who faced economic and social discrimination due to their dark skin and heritage. The town “Miseria” seems to be a blatant metaphor of the harsh living conditions of those who travel north of the border. “Refugio¹⁰,” seems to represent their refugee status within the United States, and it may even point to the family’s illegal status north of the border.

The man seems to have been influenced by “*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*”

¹⁰ Mexicans often name their children metaphorically. For example, *Consuelo* means to console, *Lupita* is a form of Our Lady Guadalupe, *Blanca* is the Spanish word for white etc. *Refugia* is a traditional Spanish name that also means refugee. So it could be possible that *Refugia* could have been a literal refugee or that her parents were literal refugees.

which was a Chicano movement that sought social and economic reform and equality for all Chicano people. Rafael Perez-Torres writes in *Movements in Chicano Poetry*, “The notion of Aztlan was introduced to Chicana discourse with ‘El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan,’ drafted in March 1969 for the Chicano Youth Conference held in Denver, Colorado.” The draft was written and supported by “farm workers, community organizers, and university students in a flurry of activity defining and refining El Movimiento.” *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan* “demand[ed] equal representation and affirming a role for Chicanas within ‘the framework of constitutional democracy and freedom’ [and] marked a new level of Chicana self-determination by establishing La Raza Unida, an independent and, to a degree, efficacious political party” (58). Those involved with or influenced by *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan* strived to recreate an erased history by filling in the missing spots themselves. Torres indicates in his book that while the movement as a whole was empowering and eventually led to a Chicano political party responsible for creating white collar jobs for hundreds of Chicano residents living in Texas, ultimately it failed in its mission to create total equality.

Chato, inspired by the movement, becomes a sort of radicalized nationalist responsible for the murder of at least a dozen women. Adopting a new Mayan identity, Chato refers to himself as “Chaq Uxmal Paloquin” and believes that by having a son he will “bring back the grandeur of [his] people from those who have broken the arrows, from those who have pushed the ancient stones off their pedestals” (29). The narrator says, “he had prayed in the Temple of the Magician years ago as a child when his father made him promise to bring back the ancient ways” (30). Living “in a little room that used to be a closet— pink plastic curtains on a narrow window, a dirty cot covered with newspapers, and a cardboard box filled with socks and rusty tools,” he shows the thirteen year old narrator a small arsenal of weapons that he has used to murder people in his quest to bring back the ancient

ways. The thirteen year old narrator does not want to know about his violence and chooses to turn a blind eye toward it, but the audience recognizes Chato's insanity. He uses his glorification of a Mayan past to mesmerize and seduce a naive adolescent. After sleeping with the child, Chato disappears and the girl learns the truth about the man who misled her.

The narrator eventually discovers that Chato's sister is a Carmelite nun, meaning that his family was partially Spanish. He was a Mestizo just like most of the people in Mexico. He turned out to have darker skin than pure Spanish-Americans, and because of that dark skin, he was discriminated against. The girl finds out that Chato is thirty-seven years old and is captured by the police for the murder of "eleven females." From an ancient Mayan perspective, these killings may have been Chato's sacrifices to the gods. Lisa J. Lucero and Sherry Gibs write, "The Creation and Sacrifice of Witches in Classic Maya Society" that "People can be sacrificed for the same reasons witches are killed - to restore order or normalcy in the face of misfortune" (46). Because Chato, his family, and other people that he knew were experiencing discrimination from what he perceived to be outside forces, perhaps the sacrifices of the women were used to gain the attention of the gods. Chato was so deep into the myth of the Aztlán past that he could not see how adopting brutal customs from the past could be detrimental to a progressive future.

Just because a custom was practiced religiously in one's culture does not mean it should be practiced in the present for the sake of preserving one's culture. When Gayatri Spivak writes about the cultural practice of Indian *Sati*, (the self-sacrificial ritual that women perform when their husbands die) she is not suggesting that women should sacrifice themselves when their husbands die. On the contrary, she is encouraging subaltern people to think for themselves and choose what parts of their culture they want to identify with. Rather than being saved or destroyed by colonizers, she wants the indigenous

people of India to set up their own rules and establish their own independence. At the same time, Spivak realizes what it means for indigenous nativist individuals to cling to cultural traditions directly in opposition to colonial laws and practices. While discussing academic study involving Western education and mobilization of subaltern groups, Spivak quotes Nancy Ashis:

Groups rendered psychologically marginal by their exposure to Western impact. . . had come under pressure to demonstrate to others as well as to themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture. To them, *sati* became an important proof of their conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within.’ (289)

At the same time, Spivak is not advocating the practice of *sati*. She asks the question, “How is it possible to want to die by fire to mourn a husband ritually?” (282). The rhetorical answer is obviously that few people actually want to die. Spivak writes:

The point is not that a refusal would not be ventriloquism for Women’s Rights. One is not suggesting that only the latter is correct free will. One is suggesting that the freedom of the will is negotiable, and it is not on the grounds of a disinterested free will that we will be able to justify an action, in this case against the burning of widows, to the adequate satisfaction of all. The ethical aporia is not negotiable. We must act in view of this. (287)

In other words, refusing the act of *sati* would not be blindly following a western-centric feminist worldview. The subaltern women in India have to refuse the act for themselves because this is the ethical thing to do. Spivak encourages subaltern people to think for themselves. Spivak has even established educational institutions in India with the intention of empowering women. In the original version of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak argued that the subaltern cannot speak. However, in the revised version of the same

article Spivak argues against her earlier statement to say that the subaltern can speak as long as there is a system in power in place to listen to the subaltern.

Chato, a subaltern character living just north of the Texas-Mexico border, is angry at the colonial system that has entrapped him within the lowest social strata. In an act of defiance, he becomes a radicalized nativist obsessed with a mythical history. For those who cross Chato's path, the results are disastrous. For seven years, Chato murdered eleven girls and brought their bodies to an ancient Mayan cave named *Las Grutas de Xtacumbilxuna*, possibly as an offering to the Mayan gods. Mary Prat Brady writes in her article "The Contrapuntal Geographies of *Woman Hollering Creek* and Other Stories" that there "is the suggestion here of a link between a serial killer and colonialism, between a nearly prosaic sense of a history of oppression and an individual figure who uses that history not to lead an uprising but to murder young girls" (150). His actions, while pointing toward a mythical Mayan past, irreparably damage any sympathy he would have received from other individuals involved in "*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*." Sandra Cisneros possibly created Chato to urge readers to consider the negative effects of the Spanish colonization of Mexico. Chato's misplaced rage against white classism becomes directed at innocent women who also suffer by the system he is protesting.

Caramelo Men

Part of Gloria Anzaldúa's argument criticizing masculinity within Mexican culture is that there needs to be a new kind of masculinity. According to Anzaldúa, there is so much pressure and acceptance within Mexican culture for men to be selfish and violent that oftentimes this toxic masculinity backfires even on the men themselves. Men need a safe environment where they can express their vulnerability without having their masculinity

questioned. Feminism, Anzaldúa argues, is the thing that will ultimately change the world for better. She writes:

As long as woman is put down, the Indian and the Black in all of us is put down. The struggle of the *mestiza*¹¹ is above all a feminist one. As long as *los hombres*¹² think they have to *chingar mijeres*¹³ and each other to be men, as long as men are taught that they are superior and therefore culturally favored over *la mujer*¹⁴, as long as to be *vejja*¹⁵ is a thing of derision, there can be no real healing of our psyches. (84)

What Cisneros seems to understand is that toxic masculinity does not only affect women. The same social structures suppressing women, of which toxic masculinity plays an essential role, are the same social structures that are suppressing men as well. *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek* examined the subalternity and oppression of men. In those books, the men are oppressed because of their socio-economic status within culture. The men in *Caramelo* are middle class citizens so their suffering is related to the cultural expectations for men to be financial providers, who are supposed to honor duty over emotions.

The issues with which the men in *Caramelo* struggle are interpersonal and usually involve the people close to the subject. The men are judged by their vulnerability by members within their social class. Cisneros uses these close-knit social circles to expose burdens that Mexican culture places on itself. Rather than portraying the men as suffering at the hand of racial classism, Cisneros portrays middle class men who are suffering from within their culture. These men are not subaltern. They are educated, globalized, and are often respected members of their community. These men are not white;

¹¹ a female mestizo

¹² men

¹³ fuck around with women and fight with men

¹⁴ the woman

¹⁵ old woman

they are proud *mestizos* who are proud of their heritage.

This section focuses on the characters Eleuterio, his son Narciso, and his grandson Inocencio. It studies the relationship between globalization and middle class *mestizos* and how both globalization and middle class are slowly changing masculine expectations within Mexican and Mexican-American culture. Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs discusses the literary trend of globalization within the Mexican literary community in the essay "Sandra Cisneros and her Trade of the Free Word." Gutierrez y Muhs argues "In conjunction with the agenda of other writers to solidify Chicana/o characters and dispel subjectivity stereotypes, Cisneros contributes to the project of globalization Chicana literature, and historicizing Chicano/Mexican culture" (24). Cisneros actively fights gender stereotypes in her novel *Caramelo* by introducing independent characters who are developing their *mestiza/o* consciousness. By placing her characters in a historical context, Cisneros reveals different aspects of the new *mestizo/mestiza*.

Writing the history of not only the Reyes family but Mexico as well, Cisneros broadens the reader's perspective of the Mexican *mestizo*. Rather than focusing on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, Cisneros shows that family lineages are not limited to Spain and Mexico. She writes of Inocencio Reyes:

It could be said Inocencio Reyes lived the life of a person in self-exile, happiest when he could devote himself to his daydreams. Love inspired him to think, as it inspires so many fools. He dedicated his life to this interior inquiry. He did not know he was continuing a tradition that traveled across water and sand from nomadic ancestors, Persian poets, Cretan acrobats, Bedouin philosophers, Andalusian matadors praying to la Virgen de la Macarena. Each had in turn influenced their descendant Inocencio Reyes. A low-ranking Baghdad vizier, an Egyptian cheesemonger, an Oulid Naid belly dancer wearing her dowry of coins

around her hips, a gypsy holy man, a goose herder, an Arab saddle-maker, a scholar nun carried off by a Berber chieftain the day Córdoba was sacked, a Sephardic astronomer whose eyes were put out in the Inquisition, a pockmarked slave girl—the sultan’s favorite—couched in a gold and ivory seraglio on the shores of the Abi Diz. Tunis. Carthage. Fez. Cartagena. Seville. And like his ancestors he attempted his own treatise on that enigma of enigmas. What is love? How does one know one is in love? How many different kinds of love are there? Is there truly a love at first sight? Perhaps he was going as far back as our graffiti-artists grand-others of Altamira who painted on the walls of caves. (199-200)

In one fell swoop, Cisneros not only redefines what it means to be a *mestizo*, but she also redefines masculinity within the *mestizo* community. Inocencio is more interested in introspection, love, and daydreaming— characteristics generally attributed to females. Perhaps these feminine characteristics were genetically passed onto him through ancestors who were more attracted to creative arts than a life based on practicality.

By this point in the novel, the reader is already aware of Inocencio’s Mexican indigenous roots. His grandmother Regina Reyes is described as having skin “as dark as *cajeta*” having come from the countryside outside of Mexico City. The audience is also aware that Inocencio’s grandfather Eleuterio Reyes immigrated to Mexico from Seville, Spain. What the audience does not know, up until this point, is that even Eleuterio Reyes had *mestizo* blood and was a mixture of not only Spanish, but Jewish, Middle Eastern, and African roots as well. It is not explicitly stated in the novel, but perhaps the Reyes family’s knowledge of their ancestry kept them from ascribing to the idea of returning to Atzlan. The world is their home, and they are comfortable traversing it.

The narrator credits their multinational family lineage for Inocencio’s

atypical masculinity. She insists, “Inocencio Reyes lived the life of a person in self-exile, happiest when he could devote himself to his daydreams. Love inspired him to think, as it inspires so many fools. He dedicated his life to this interior inquiry” (199). Rather than living like *los hombres*, Inocencio nurtured those qualities usually attributed to women: “While other young men busied themselves with serious preparations for their profession, Inocencio took to staying up late at night [. . .] indulged himself in what he loved to do most— dream. Asleep dreaming or awake dreaming, this is what Inocencio did best.” (200). Inocencio’s fantasies prompt him to leave Mexico and begin a new life in the United States.

Although Inocencio Reyes is tender-hearted, Cisneros uses this character to confront the serious issue of infidelity and as Gloria Anzaldúa called it, “*la mujer*”. The cultural expectations for women and men are strikingly different from each other. Inocencio’s family expected him to embrace masculine activities such as studying, working hard, and being a provider for their families. Inocencio was described as being a lazy student. According to the narrator, he was only interested in “picking up women” (207). It is through his sexual exploits as a teenager that he ends up impregnating a woman only referred to in the text as “a washerwoman¹⁶” (35-36). Rather than taking on the responsibility and marrying the young woman, Inocencio illegally enters the United States and starts a new life as an apprentice upholsterer for his uncle.

Inocencio carries his pride with him to the United States. Repeatedly insisting, “*nosotros no somos perros.* ¹⁷” throughout the story, Inocencio

¹⁶ Ironically, Inocencio Reyes is also the son of a washerwoman. His mother Soledad was a live-in servant for Regina and Eleuterio Reyes. When Eleuterio discovered that his son Narciso had impregnated the servant girl, he implored his son to marry her because it was his obligation to take care of the family. Rather taking responsibility for the impregnated woman, Inocencio flees to the United States to start a new life. His mother Soledad employs the bastard daughter, but Candelaria is eventually lost forever.

¹⁷ The literal meaning of this is “we are not dogs.” But this carries heavy implications for the social status and the moral responsibilities of the subject. “We are not dogs” suggests the ability to live in comfort. Inocencio Reyes owns an upholstery company and claims to be responsible for his family.

tries to present a masculine front, one that is refined, financially secure, and responsible for his family. Heather Alumbaugh refutes Inocencio's claims in the essay, "Narrative Coyotes: Migration and Narrative Voice in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*." Alumbaugh states:

Despite [Inocencio's] claim that the family is not poor, the dilapidated conditions of their residence—the absence of a yard, the darkness in the hallways, and the eroding paint—attest to their poverty. In addition, their lack of privacy within the individual flats and throughout the apartment buildings and their lack of money to improve their built environment underscore the Reyes family's socioeconomic status. (57)

The fact is that Inocencio Reyes entered the United States illegally, with virtually no money in his pocket. However, once he settled in the United States, he became the owner of a small upholstery company. Later in life, they even have a "truck painted up with the new name, Inocencio Reyes and Sons. Quality upholstery. Over forty years experience" (412). So while the family experienced some financial hardships in the United States for a few years, the family does not remain as a subaltern class of people. All of Inocencio's children from his second family were educated at a private school, and he was able to throw his second daughter a lavish *quinceañera* when she turned fifteen. Rather than perpetuating the idea of Mexican-American poverty, Cisneros unfolds a story that rewards hard work and perseverance.

The phrase "*nosotros no somos perros*" also implies a familial pride in their European ancestry. It is almost used to celebrate the colonizers who slowly took over the *Aztlán* region. It was first used by Eleuterio to his son Narciso in the 1920s when Narciso impregnated a servant working for the Reyes family. Narciso wanted to abandon the young woman, but Eleuterio

However, the narrator of the novel is aware that Inocencio has a daughter in Mexico that he abandoned.

insisted the right thing to do was to marry the young woman. Seattle University professor Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs writes that because Eleuterio “opts for the union between an indigenous woman and his son by arguing that ‘we are not dogs’ ” Cisneros is simultaneously humanizing the characters and showing the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized during the times of the Mexican Revolution (28). By arguing, “we are not dogs,” Eleuterio is insisting that the Spanish are civilized because they respect the Christian idea of a child growing up with two parents. He implies that the indigenous people of Mexico would ignore familial duties, but his family is Spanish and therefore the Reyes must adhere to Christian traditions.

Eleuterio was the patriarch of the Reyes family who hailed from Seville, Spain. Carrying on a long tradition of migration and travel within his own family line, Eleuterio settled down in Mexico under Spanish rule. He married an indigenous woman with skin “as dark as *cajeta*” and tried to earn a living as a piano teacher. Ironically, Eleuterio’s salary was not enough to support the three-person family. It was his wife’s job as a merchant that not only kept the family afloat but raised the Reyes family up to middle-class.

Throughout the novel, Cisneros uses the phrase “*nosotros no somos perros.*” to both confront and challenge stereotypical Mexican ideals of masculinity. The phrase is not only used to express the family’s pride with their history, socioeconomic status, and morality, but it is used to point out the hypocritical interstices in the argument.

Eleuterio was not the breadwinner of the Reyes family. Had it not been for his wife, the Reyes family would have been very poor. Although Eleuterio’s son Narciso marries the indigenous servant woman that he impregnates, he spends the majority of his life sleeping with other woman and pining for a woman that he cannot have. Finally, Inocencio tried to indoctrinate his

children with the mantra but ultimately failed when his daughter realized he had another family in Mexico that was unprovided for, impoverished, and uneducated.

Cisneros uses Eleuterio, Narciso, and Inocencio to show the audience how masculinity within Mexican culture is shifting. However, rather than portraying all three men as heroes, she chooses to portray them as human with relatable sins and faults. Although Eleuterio was poor, he is loyal to his wife and his family. His choice to pursue a career in arts by teaching music while his wife earns money as a merchant shows a softer side of masculinity.

Notwithstanding the fact that Narciso is a philanderer, he still exhibits character traits usually attributed to women. By referring to Narciso as the “Little Grandfather,” the narrator suggests that he is not a strong masculine type. It is revealed that after being wounded during the Mexican revolution, Narciso sought out asylum in the United States where he developed a love for dancing. Although submitted to his father’s pressure to marry the woman he impregnated, Narciso led a double life where he fell in love with a bisexual cabaret singer. Eventually, the cabaret singer leaves Narciso to be with a woman, and he secretly pines for her the rest of his life. Cisneros shows us the emotional vulnerability of men through the Narciso. Like the wound he suffered during the Mexican revolution, Narciso is unable to heal from the emotional pain that resulted from the affair.

Inocencio represents the new *mestizo* consciousness in that rather than following traditions rooted in Spanish Christianity by marrying the woman he impregnates, Inocencio follows his own path. It is tragic that he abandons the family he accidentally started when he was teenager, but he lives the life he chooses in the United States. While he is in the United States, Inocencio adopts American ideals such as running his own business and owning a home. When he feels like he is emotionally and financially ready, Inocencio marries a woman whom he truly loves. Not only is he proud of his family, he loves

them very much and often expresses his love and devotion for this family. Part of the *mestizo* consciousness is choosing to be selfish and rebellious against one's culture.

His family culture would dictate that he marry the washerwoman in spite of the fact that he was an uneducated and unskilled teenager. Choosing self over family, choosing dreams over reality, Inocencio embodies the new *mestizo* consciousness. The partner that he chooses is a Mexican-American woman. According to Inocencio's mother his wife "can't even speak a proper Spanish" (85). They raise eight children together with both American and Mexican values. Inocencio's illegitimate daughter is a blight on their otherwise perfect family. While tragic, Cisneros uses this situation to show readers the familial complexity of the *mestizo* family.

Chapter Three

Women Empowerment Through Economic Responsibility and Religious Expression

The previous chapter discussed the way that men confronted masculinity and subalternity within Mexican and Mexican-American culture. We saw the various ways that the new *mestizo* refused to conform to conventional lifestyles and heteronormative gender roles by shaping a new and unique identity. This chapter focuses on the women in Cisneros' s works who rebel against their cultural norms and create a new identity. The idea of *yin* and *yang* is central to shaping Cisneros' s worldview. She strongly believes that the masculine and the feminine complement each other, and that people need to address the social issues and needs of both genders. In Cisneros' s works, the readers can see how men challenge preconceived notions of masculinity by the way they openly embrace feminine traits, whether it be dressing in women' s clothes and identifying as a woman, or focusing on dreams and fantasies.

When Cisneros shows the audience how women confront their gender problems, she does so by creating characters who are financially responsible for themselves and their families. The women in Cisneros' s works also deviate away from the traditional religious values that have oppressed women for hundreds of years. Instead of viewing religion as an institution which suppresses women, Cisneros uses religion to embolden and empower the women and gives subaltern characters a loud voice so that they can be

heard. Rather than focusing on individual characters, this chapter will be divided into themes which are supported by various characters throughout the works of Sandra Cisneros.

Ambitious Women and Economic Power

Often ambitious women are depicted as being cruel, but Cisneros reveals the truth behind the cruel facade. Women in her stories seek out and obtain economic power as a means of freedom and expression. Esperanza Cordova's dream of leaving the barrio in *The House on Mango Street* is undoubtedly Cisneros's most referenced character out of all of her literature. Esperanza is successful in her endeavors to become a writer, she leaves the barrio, and establishes economic freedom for herself. Esperanza makes the promise "to come back [f]or the ones [she] left behind," (110) but the audience never knows whether or not Esperanza actually returns to the barrio. The promise Esperanza makes seems to be rooted in the fear of being seen as selfish, for choosing a career over Mexican community. The promise she makes at the end of *The House on Mango Street* wistfully acknowledges her need to escape with the justification that she will "come back" and save others. The sentiment is nice, but it fails to acknowledge some of the larger issues that are recurrent in third world feminist dialogue, including sexuality, religious reconstruction, and economic freedom. The audience knows that Esperanza wants to become economically independent, but the readers are never given a chance to see what a liberated Esperanza looks like.

This is because when Cisneros wrote *The House on Mango Street*, she was ignorant of Gloria Anzaldúa and *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Becoming a published writer was the number one thing that Cisneros wanted, but she had not yet been educated in third world feminist philosophy. Cisneros writes in her autobiography *House of My Own*:

She hasn't read Virginia Woolf yet. She doesn't know about Rosario Castellanos or Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga are cutting their own paths through the world somewhere, but she doesn't know about them. She doesn't know anything. She's making things up as she goes. (274)

Although Cisneros had no knowledge of Gloria Anzaldúa's new *mestiza* theory, many of the characters in *The House on Mango Street*, show signs of having the new *mestiza* consciousness. In *A House of My Own*, Cisneros credits her literary agent Suzan Bergholz, to introducing her to Gloria Anzaldúa as well as other "radical women of color¹⁸" (285). After Cisneros joins the feminist movement, the characters in *Women Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo* reflect the teachings and philosophies of Gloria Anzaldúa. Crucial to Anzaldúa's theory is the growth and development of a woman's economic freedom. As Cisneros continues to study Anzaldúa, her characters appear to be influenced more directly by Anzaldúa's new *mestiza* theory.

Anzaldúa understands the social roles that women are expected to fulfill, and she encourages women to rebel against those social roles. Rather than encouraging a disorganized mass rebellion against an ambiguous idea of patriarchy, Anzaldúa provides a revisionist version of history to help women understand what powers were responsible for creating religious and economic oppression that has lasted for centuries. According to Anzaldúa, it was the Roman-Catholic church's perspective of women that ultimately led to the oppression of indigenous and mestizaje. She writes:

Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a frenzy of anger and fear. (17)

¹⁸ taken from *This Bridge Called my Back*, a famous collection of essays by non-white feminist writers including Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Nellie Wong, and other influential women

This fear of women is responsible for the oppression of them. The Christian fear of woman fetters women into the role of virgin, woman, or whore. Anzaldúa writes, “Cultures (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles” (17). Discouraged from working professionally, Mexican women often spend their time at home daydreaming about an education and career they do not have. This is something which Cisneros observed in her own family, and she recounts the memory of her mother in her autobiography, “The kitchen was my mother’s classroom, and she was promoted from the ninth grade to the University of Life with a PhD” (35-36). Cisneros used her mother as the inspiration for Esperanza’s mother in *The House on Mango Street*. “I could’ve been somebody, you know?” (90). Esperanza then describes her mother’s accomplishments which include the ability to speak two languages, sing opera, and fix electrical equipment (90). In Cisneros’s novel *Caramelo*, Ceyala voices her mother’s frustration about being prevented from working:

With seven children and with Zoila [Ceyala’s mother] at home as homemaker, there was never enough for a house, though Zoila argued that if only Inocencio would let her work they could save for a down payment. – Real Estate! That’s the ticket, she said. But Inocencio countered with his own argument, --What! A wife of mine work? Don’t offend me. (289)

The fact that women were discouraged from working resonated with Cisneros, and it became a source of contention between herself and her own father. It was the driving force behind her decision to create fiercely independent female characters who are economically responsible for themselves and their families.

At times, the female characters who are economically independent come across as being villainous and selfish. Regina Reyes, the earliest matriarch mentioned in *Caramelo*, is known for her backhanded compliments and cruel

treatment toward the servant girl Soledad, who later becomes Regina's daughter-in-law. But selfishness, Anzaldúa argues, is crucial to the development of the new *mestiza* consciousness. She writes, "In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue" (18). When women embrace selfishness, when they choose to work instead of allowing men to financially take care of them, they are able to provide an easier life for not only themselves but their families as well.

In *Caramelo*, Regina Reyes recognized the need for a double income almost a century before the Chicana feminist movement. Although Regina's husband Eleuterio Reyes was a piano instructor, his salary did not provide a comfortable life for the small three-person family. Regina took it upon herself to become a tradeswoman in order to supplement income. People around the city "brought her used items to sell, and on weekends she had a stand in el Baratillo market." Regina Reyes' family was able to live in a middle-class home with "many bedrooms" and live-in servants (115). Having a side business, even for a woman, in the early part of the twentieth century, was still frowned upon by Mexican society. Because of this, Regina "did not like to talk about" her side business.

During the Mexican Revolution, items became rare and Regina moved the market business to the inside of her home, where Soledad, one of the live-in servants who would later become Regina's daughter-in-law, helped to manage the shop. At a time when hordes of middle-class Mexicans fled to the United States during the Mexican revolution to escape sudden poverty, the Reyes family was able to stay in Mexico and continue their middle-class existence because of Regina's business.

Regina Reyes may be a paratextual reference to an "Aztec noblewoman who was presented to Cortés upon landing in Veracruz in 1519" (Alarcón 182). Although there is no reference to La Malinche within *Caramelo*, there

are enough similarities between the two women to draw the parallel. Natelie Irene Schumann writes about La Malinche: “Her name has been transformed into an insult, Malinchista, now officially listed in Spanish dictionaries and used commonly in Mexican Spanish, means traitor” (1). Regina can be viewed as a traitor to her indigenous people, as she abandoned her Indian lover for the sake of money. In turn, the lover committed suicide. There is something shameful about putting money before love, but for Regina Reyes, the possession of things was integral to her identity formation.

According to Norma Alarcón, author of “Chicana’ s Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzin or Malintzin: Putting the Flesh Back on the Object” Malintzen, or La Malinche, remains a constant inspiration for Chicana feminist literature. La Malinche was supposed to be a gift for Cortez, a sexual concubine, but because of her demeanor and wit, La Malinche became a “translator and tactical advisor” to the Spanish colonizer (182). When Eleuterio first saw Regina in the market selling papaya, he probably thought he could take her because he was Spanish and she was indigenous. He did not know that she would become the matriarch responsible for the Reyes’ family economic stability. In the beginning of their relationship, Eleuterio was only interested in her beauty.

In *Caramelo*, Regina’ s beauty is mentioned several times. “God had been kind to la Senor Regina. As dark as a cat, she was no taller than Soledad, yet she held herself like a queen” (112). It was her beauty that attracted the Spaniard Eleuterio Reyes, while Regina was selling fruit in the market. The narrator imagines the scenario in which the two meet: “What will you like sir? - not realizing he would take her” (113). Instead of becoming a sexual concubine to Eleuterio, Regina becomes the matriarch of the Reyes family. Similar to La Malinche, Regina raises her economic status by starting a second-hand furniture business and becomes the provider for not only herself, her son Narcisso, and her husband, but she is also able to employ a few

subaltern women in her service. The narrator compares Regina to “India Bonita” another La Malinche type “whose beauty brought Maximilian to his knees as if he was a gardener too and not the emperor of Mexico” (117). Regina Reyes used her uncanny beauty to attract a Spaniard, and from there established economic independence for the Reyes family. The fact that she only had one son, and spent the majority of her time managing the house that her financial income paid for suggests that she refused to remain a sexual concubine to a colonizer and chose instead to embrace her power.

In *The House on Mango Street*, which is a coming of age story, the main character Esperanza Cordova narrates the events which transpired prior to her financial independence. From the beginning of the story, the audience knows that Esperanza Cordova becomes a successful author and leaves the barrio, but there are no details that reveal what her life is like after she achieves success. The story becomes a modern day fable that suggests the American dream is possible. If one works hard enough, they can become successful.

Woman Hollering Creek, the second book published by Sandra Cisneros, introduces Lupe, who is a character that has already established her economic independence. Unlike Regina, who married into status, Lupe, of “Bien Pretty” is an entirely self-made woman. Lupe Arredondo, an artist from San Francisco, pays her way through university in addition to supporting her then boyfriend Eddie. Lupe is political. She claims to have marched during the Cesar Chavez grape strike in the 1960s with her best friend Beatriz Soliz. Both women are powerful, as Beatriz spends her days as “a defense criminal lawyer” and her nights as “an Aztec dance instructor” (141). Lupe Arredondo is not only a powerful woman but chooses to surround herself by other powerful women. While on a Fulbright scholarship, Lupe spends a year in Texas living in the house of a famous Texas poet named Irasema Izuara Coronado who “carries herself as if she is directly descended from

Ixtaccihuatl” (139). Being emotionally and financially independent, Lupe seems intent on reversing every gender stereotype.

She works sixty hours a week as an art director for a local community college and spends her night “crumpling into the couch after work, drinking half a Corona and eating a bag of Hawaiian potato chips” (143). The woman has no desire to be a homemaker and soon finds herself living with cockroaches. In order to get rid of the pests, Lupe hires an indigenous looking man named Flavio Munguia to exterminate the pests. While the gaze is usually set on the woman, Lupe reverses the male gaze toward Flavio. She becomes fixated on his appearance and begins to develop the idea for a painting featuring Mexico’s Prince Popocatepetl and Princess Iztaccihuatl. Both Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl are a volcano and mountain in Mexico, and the myth surrounding the two remains a constant source of inspiration for Lupe Arredondo. She believes that the bug exterminator is the perfect model for the new interpretive piece she wants to create based on the myth of Prince Popocatepetl and Princess Ixtaccihuatl. She writes:

I’d always wanted to do an updated version of the Prince Popocatepetl/Princess Ixtaccihuatl volcano myth, that tragic love story metamorphosized from classic to kitsch calendar art, like the ones you get at Carniceria Ximenez or Tortilleria la Guadalupanita. Prince Popo, half-naked Indian warrior, built like Johnny Weiss muller, crouched in grief beside his sleeping princess Ixtaccihuatl, buxom as as Indian Jayne Mansfield. And behind them, echoing their silhouettes, their namesake volcanoes.

Hell, I could do better than that. It’d be fun. (144)

Elizabeth Jacobs discusses in her book *Mexican American Literature: The Politics of Identity* how men and women experienced “the return to Atzlan” movement differently. Where men were able to form a national identity to “fight oppression,” women were excluded from the dialogue. Jacobs writes

that, “Nationalism and nation building were promoted as the all-encompassing answer to oppression, but at the same time its generically masculinist ideology meant that sexuality and gender were placed second to other issues (135). Lupe is aware of the dissonance between masculine power and feminine power, and she wants there to be a balance and create a new *mestizaje*. She values her cultural heritage but opposes the manner in which women are often sexualized, subjugated, and erased.

Therefore, Lupe wants to change the way the public views Prince Popocatepetl and Princess Ixtaccihuatl. Instead of painting another piece that shows a woman in her most passive state (asleep), she wants to give the princess power. Rose Marie Cutting writes in her essay, “Closure in Sandra Cisneros’ s ‘*Woman Hollering Creek*,” “Lupe constructs rather than accepts cultural icons as fixed entities. She takes an image from a traditional Mexican myth and transforms it into the image that suits her need to reverse gender roles-- an image that allows her to repudiate the fiction of gender as ‘natural’ ” (70). Lupe’ s painting depicting the man asleep and the woman awake challenges the preconceived notion of the passive woman. Furthermore, the painting reflects Lupe’ s realization that self-love and self-care are more important than receiving love from a man. Lupe is “awake” in the sense that she no longer dreams about finding true love.

Lupe uses her relationship with Flavio Munguia as inspiration for the piece. Subjugating Flavio to her gaze and supporting him financially instead of the other way around allow Lupe to feel empowered. Her confidence is briefly shattered when Flavio tells her that he must return to Mexico to his two wives and children. She spends time healing from the breakup and comes to the conclusion that life is more important than finding love. She celebrates the strength she finds in observing “real women,” not the ones written about in TV or portrayed in art. Women are meant to be “passionate and powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And, above all, fierce” (161). Equipped

with the mantra, “I love you, honey, but I love me more,” Lupe finishes the painting she had set off to paint. In the piece, “Prince Popo and Princess Ixta trade places. After all, who’s to say the sleeping mountain isn’t the prince, and the voyeur the princess right? So I’ve done it my way. With Prince Popocatepetl lying on his back instead of the Princess” (163). This revisionist painting signifies Lupe’s growth into a self-empowered woman who is responsible for caring for herself. She is the volcano, not the sleeping mountain.

Regina Reyes and Lupe Arredondo are two of the most powerful characters in all of Cisneros’s work. Both women rely on themselves for both financial and emotional stability and therefore present a powerful role model for impressionable women to emulate. Rather than romanticizing their existence or offering a romanticized ideal of an independent woman, Cisneros depicts realistic characters who contend with adversity and pain. Regina Reyes lifted herself out of subalternity and was able to provide for her family. In fact, she did so well financially that the next three generations of Reyes did not have to experience subalternity¹⁹. Lupe Arredondo seems to have been born into middle-class. She had the luxury protesting on behalf Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers grape strike, graduating from a prestigious university in California, and being able to paint and live on a Fullbright scholarship. The lives of these inspirational women suggest alternative paths to self-sustainability and survival to which women can attain.

Religious Reconstruction for the Modern *Mestiza*

Reconstructing religion is essential for many Mexican and Mexican-American

¹⁹ With the exception of Candelaria, who is the illegitimate daughter of Inocencio. Candelaria was Regina Reyes great-granddaughter, but because Inocencio ran away to America to escape the burden of fatherhood, the relationship was not recognized by the Reyes family. Soledad Reyes, mother to Inocencio and daughter-in-law of Regina Reyes allowed Candelaria to live in the house as a servant for some years, but when the family did not need servants anymore, Candelaria is abandoned. Her disappearance in the novel and her absence from the Reyes family shows what happens to children born out of wedlock. Candelaria is uneducated, dirty, poor, and because there are no people willing to listen to her needs, Candelaria disappears into the busy noise of Mexico City.

women who are intent on creating a new identity so that they can be released from Roman-Catholic ideologies institutionalized through the Spanish colonization of Mexico. Some *mestizas* turn to the African Yoruba religion mixed with Catholicism to create a Mexican version of Voodoo. Some women return to the forgotten goddesses of the Aztec, while other women seek out religions from all over the world to make their own personalized vision of spirituality. Regardless of which spirit, saint, or belief the woman relies on, the creation of new religions within Mexican society work in conjunction with a woman's ability to not only survive in a man's world but thrive in it as well.

Rather than abandoning religion altogether, many women are examining the roots of Mexico's patron Saint Our Lady of Guadalupe in search for a spiritual being who will guide, protect, and empower them. Originally sainted as an apparition of The Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe allegedly first appeared to one of the earliest Mexican indigenous Catholic converts named Juan Diego on December 9, 1531. The story says that Our Lady of Guadalupe asked Juan Diego to build a church at the site where she appeared, at the site which is known as Tepeyac. Allegedly, Guadalupe guided Juan Diego to a bush of roses which were in full bloom, although it was winter, and urged him to bring some of the flowers to the Catholic Church as proof of her divinity. This coupled with the miracle of healing a dying man was proof enough for the Catholic Church. In 1737, Our Lady of Guadalupe was sworn in as the "principal Patroness" of Mexico City, and has since then become the patron saint of all Mexico. The Catholic Church has used the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to establish its dominance as the one true religion over indigenous people of Mexico.

However, the myth of Guadalupe is also used to suppress women's sexuality and condition them into concrete roles in the family. Historian Jacque Lafaye challenges the Catholic origin story of Our Lady Guadalupe in

his book, *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The Formation of Mexican National Consciousness*. In the book, he examines the earliest references of Guadalupe and discusses how her appearance changes both visually and metaphorically. Gloria Anzaldúa believes Guadalupe to be not a Catholic Saint, but an indigenous woman wishing to honor the ancient Aztec goddess “Tonantsi” which means “Our Lady Mother” (28). Anzaldúa offers the readers a completely revisionist history of the exchange between Guadalupe and Juan Diego on December 9, 1531. She argues:

Guadalupe appeared on December 9, 1531, on the spot where the Aztec goddess, Tonantsi (“Our Lady Mother”), had been worshipped by the Nahuas and where a temple to her had stood. Speaking Nahuatl, she told Diego, a poor Indian crossing Tepeyac Hill, whose Indian name was *Cuautlahuac* and who belonged to the *mazehual* class, the humblest within the Chichimeca tribe, that her name was Maria *Coatlatlopeuh*. Coati is the Nahuatl word for serpent. Lopeuh means “the one who has dominion over serpents.” I interpret this as “the one who is at one with the beasts.” Some spell her name *Coatlaxopeuh* (pronounced “Cuatlashupe” in Nahuatl) and say that “*xopeuh*” means “crushed or stepped on with disdain.” Some say it means “she who crushed the serpent,” with the serpent as the symbol of the indigenous religion, meaning that her religion was to take the place of the Aztec religion. Because *Coatlatlopeuh* was homophonous with the Spanish Guadalupe, the Spanish identified her with the dark Virgin, Guadalupe, patroness of West Central Spain. (28-29)

Presenting Guadalupe as a goddess of power has inspired Mexican and Mexican-American women to challenge their religious upbringing and create a new deity that represents who they are. Women who choose to imagine Guadalupe as an Aztec goddess are not necessarily returning to ancient roots; they are creating an entirely new religion that is empowering. Anzaldúa writes that the ancient Aztec religions were as oppressive toward women as Spanish

Catholicism. Embracing Guadalupe as an Aztec goddess is a relatively recent concept that aligns with the new *mestiza* identity.

Sandra Cisneros writes about her experience embracing the new Guadalupe in her essay, “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess.” She recounts her earlier years how looking at the “Virgin de Guadalupe” infuriated her because it was her “culture’s role model” for women only. She was upset that males in her culture did not have to model themselves after any specific deity. She writes in *A House of My Own*:

La Lupe was damn dangerous, and ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable. Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus? I never saw any evidence of it. They were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and points us women toward our destiny—marriage and motherhood. The other option was *putahood*. (164)

Cisneros claims that after she did extensive research regarding “Guadalupe’s pre-Columbia’s antecedents” her perception of the deity changed completely. She does not embrace Guadalupe of Tepeyac or the Guadalupe of the Catholic Church.

She is Guadalupe the sex goddess, a goddess who makes me feel good about my sexual power, my sexual energy [. . .] To me la Virgin de Guadalupe is also Caotlicue, a bare-breasted creative/destructive force dressed in a serpent skirt and a lei of human skulls, hearts, and hands.” (164-165)

She attributes her “religious conversion” to reading “the books of the theorist Gloria Anzaldúa” and has since applied this vision to her characters in her novels, short stories, and poetry.

In *Caramelo*, Soledad Reyes²⁰, grandmother to Ceyala, is said to have been from a tribe of natives “from the country filled with witchcraft and superstition, still praying to the old gods along with new [. . .]” (113). The fact that Ceyala, the narrator of the story, considers the Catholic saints to be “new gods” gives the readers a glimpse into the Reyes family’s religious convictions. Catholicism is a new religion, and thus not taken very seriously. Likewise, referring to the Aztec gods as “old gods” gives the impression that religion is not a thing taken so seriously. In fact, in a moment of desperation when she finds out her husband’s infidelity, Soledad Reyes confesses her sorrows not in a church, but to an old woman who sells “stole and tamales on a wooden table outside the church” (185). Obviously, Soledad Reyes does not feel a connection to Roman Catholicism. She disregards the male priests who listen to confessions and send out the guilty with a long list of useless prayers as penance. Instead, Soledad connects with an old woman standing outside of the church. She asserts that “outside [of the church], the tamale vendor gave out only sound advice, which was so sensible as to be mistaken for foolishness” (185). She asks the vendor instead of the male priest how she can stop feeling miserable, after discovering that her husband has another lover on the other side of the country.

Because she is alone and depressed, and she struggles with being pregnant without having emotional support from her husband, Soledad Reyes “prays daily to the wooden statue of the Virgin of Solitude” whom she sees as an independent figure. She imagines “la Santísima Virgen de la Soledad mumbling and grieving all alone while Joseph, well, where the hell was he when she needed him? Dependably undependable, like all husbands” (191). To an

²⁰ All of the articles that I found in my research regarding Soledad Reyes focused on her ethnicity and vulnerability or the more negative aspects of herself. The character is presented as “The Awful Grandmother” who makes everyone in her family miserable by nagging and complaining. The character is also used to show how women turn against women in Latino culture, as she often beats or neglects the other women in her family. But Cisneros does not want to paint Soledad Reyes as a villain. She wants to show different facets of Soledad’s life, and one of those facets is the way Soledad confronts religion and uses religion for her own survival.

outsider watching Soledad Reyes, she might seem like a devoted Catholic, but she is really using Catholicism to cope with her own unbearable solitude. Praying to a saint of whom she shares the same name, Soledad's prayers to "the wooden statue of the Virgin of Solitude" become quiet meditations to herself. Without spelling it out directly, Soledad realizes she has the inner strength to endure the sadness and loneliness. She does not have to rely on the strength of religion or church, which shows empowerment of females resisting the authority of the Catholic church.

In the short story, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," twenty-three different people post notes at the foot of a Guadalupe statue in one of the local churches. A young woman named Rosario De Leon (Chayo) visits the church and reads through notes that others have left for various saints. The woman cuts off her hair which she has "never cut since the day [she] was born" (125). She confesses through silent prayer to Guadalupe that the action upset her mother to the point of tears, but Chayo wanted to bring an offering to Guadalupe. Unlike some of the other notes posted to various Catholic Saints and Santerian Orishas, Chayo asks for nothing. Coming to the church to visit Guadalupe, offering her hair to the patron saint of Mexico has to do with her personal growth and identity rather than needing something from a God, which again presents another version of empowered women.

Chayo believes she has discovered the true meaning of Guadalupe, and she spends her time in the church communing with the spirit and expressing her newfound revelation. She confesses to Guadalupe that there is a lot of pressure at home for her to be married, but she would rather spend her time painting and making art than finding love. She confesses, "I don't want to be a mother" (127). She realizes that by raising children she will have to sacrifice being an artist. While she is ruminating over her personal choices in life, revelations regarding Guadalupe come to her, almost as if Guadalupe herself is sending images of Chayo's ancestors, history, and purpose. Her

family disapproves of her choice to go to a University and study art. Her friends call her a “white girl,” so Chayo reaches out to Guadalupe, who will understand, love, and support her. She communes with Guadalupe not as the Catholic Saint, but as the old Aztec goddess Tonantzin. She writes, “I don’t know how it fell into place, how I finally understood who you are. No longer Mary the mild, but our mother Tonantzin. Your church at Tepeyac built on the site of her temple. Sacred ground no matter whose goddess claims it” (128). Chayo’s spiritual communion with Tonantzin gives her the strength to embrace her power as a woman.

In “Assumptions of the Virgin and recent Chicana writing,” Chicana literary critic Jacqueline Doyle points out that by “challenging and transforming old myths, the new *mestiza*, participates in the birth of a new culture” (173). Creating a new culture is the main goal of the new *mestiza* philosophy. As women discover and create a faith that is nurturing and supportive, future generations will not be expected to conform to restrictive social roles.

Chayo’s spiritual revelry not only includes pre-Columbian goddesses but names Roman Catholic female saints as well. Chayo appreciates certain aspects of these goddesses and saints. Conflating the goddesses and saints into a singular deity, Guadalupe becomes a multi-faceted all-powerful spiritual entity that Chayo worships:

When I learned your real name is Coatlxopeuh²¹, She Who Has
Dominion over Serpents, when I recognized you as Tonantzin, and
learned your names are Teteoinnan²², Toci²³, Xochiquetzal²⁴, Tlazolteotl²⁵,
Coatlucue²⁶, Chalchiuhtlicue²⁷, Coyolxauhqui²⁸, Huixtocihuatl²⁹,

²¹ This is the name that Gloria Anzaldúa believes is the true name of Guadalupe. She writes that “Cotlxopeuh” and “Guadalupe” are homophones.

²² mother of gods

²³ another name for Teteoinnan

²⁴ Aztec goddess of sexual power and fertility

²⁵ deity of vice and sexual philanderers

²⁶ Aztec goddess of the moon and stars, also the mother to the Aztec god of war

Chicomecoatl³⁰, Cihuacoatl³¹, when I could see you as Nuestra Señora de la Soledad³², Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro, Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos³³, Our Lady of Lourdes³⁴, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of Sorrows, I wasn't ashamed, then, to be my mother's daughter, my grandmother's granddaughter, my ancestors' child. (128)

Chayo's fervent appreciation of her ancestors' goddesses and female saints allows her to connect to and accept various parts of her personality that are suppressed and discouraged by her conservative family and friends. Using Guadalupe as a conflation of all of these goddesses and female saints allows a singular focal point that encompasses all of the parts of her identity she wants to embrace. Guadalupe gives her the permission to be the independent artists that was denied by her family and friends. Marietta Mesmer attributes the appropriation of Aztec goddesses by women in Chicana culture to their need to survive in a society that traditionally has oppressed them. She writes in the article "Transformations of the Sacred in Contemporary Chicana Culture," that "popular versions of Chicano Catholicism only contributed to Mexican Americans' ethno-cultural emancipation from Anglo-American social norms while still reinscribing the inferior status accorded to women within Mexico's traditional patriarchal society" (260).

Recognizing a woman's need for spiritual, economic, and sexual freedom, Cisneros recalls the ancient Aztec goddesses as well as European Catholic

²⁷ Aztec goddess of water and storms

²⁸ the daughter of Coatlicue, she rose against her mother but was beheaded by her brother, the Aztec god of war

²⁹ Aztec goddess of fertility and salt water

³⁰ the goddess of agriculture

³¹ goddess of childbirth

³² Our Lady of Solitude

³³ The Virgin Mary

³⁴ Also the Virgin Mary

Saints that empower women to survive and thrive in an oppressive environment.

In Cisneros' s short story, "One Holy Night," Cisneros directly addresses the oppression women face at the hands of the Mexican Catholic Church. "One Holy Night" is the story about a survivor, who in spite of her subalternity, is able to present herself as a strong female character. Although the nameless narrator is powerless, she controls the way that her story is told. In fact, the only power the narrator has is her voice, and she uses that voice to tell the story of how she was raped, impregnated, and then sent to rural Mexico to have her child and become a mother.

Chicanas are often compared to Gayatri Spivak' s subaltern woman in that they are doubly oppressed because of their skin color as well as their gender, but the character in "One Holy Night" is triply oppressed because of her skin color, gender, as well as her age. The character in "One Holy Night" is only thirteen years old, and has no way to control her destiny. Because getting an abortion is out of the question; the narrator is forced to drop out of school and move to Mexico where she can hide her pregnancy from the judgmental eyes of people north of the Texas-American border.

The narrator shares her story with the wisdom, courage, and self-respect of a much older woman. She begins the story with a foreshadowing of the events to come. "He said he would love me like a revolution, like a religion" (27). Lying to her, telling her that his name is "Chaq Uxmal Paloquín, the man in his thirties grooms the adolescent by seducing her with the idea of being related to "an ancient line of Mayan kings" (27). Part of him believes that by impregnating this young girl, his son will "bring back the grandeur of my people from those who have broken the arrows, from those who have pushed the ancient stones off their pedestals" (29). After the two sleep together, the narrator of that story becomes pregnant, and the reality of what that means sets in.

The man who seduced her is found out to be a serial killer, with multiple bodies found in a cave that used to be the site of Aztec rituals, and the girl is sent to live in San Dionysius de Tlaltepango, a city in Mexico. Aside from the cousins with whom she lives, the narrator is isolated. She does not go to school anymore, and the burden of being a mother weighs on her heavily:

I feel the animal inside me stirring in his own uneven sleep. The witch woman says it's the dreams of weasels that make my child sleep the way he sleeps. She makes me eat white bread blessed by the priest, but I know it's the ghost of him inside me that circles and circles, and will not let me rest. (34)

The plan for the rest of her life is to become a mother. She says she is “going to have five children” and promises to name her baby “Allegra, because life will always be hard” (35).

Cisneros' s story shows how women in Mexican culture are taken advantage of by a patriarchal system that needs to be changed. Due to the Catholic shame that her aunt experiences when the girl loses her virginity and becomes pregnant, the narrator is sent to live in Mexico and taken out of school. Also, because she is a woman, a man obsessed with “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan” seduces and impregnates her, while at the same time having murdered eleven other women as part of his Aztlan cause. Because the girl is underage, she cannot make any decisions for herself. Unable to finish school or find a job, the girl has no way to empower herself. Subject to men, subject to Catholicism, and subject to her family, this narrator of “One Holy Night” is a subaltern character who cannot speak for herself. Yet, she does tell her story to an undefined audience and she never reveals her true name to the audience in order to protect her identity. In the case of “One Holy Night,” the readers are supposed to be the listeners.

Spivak argues in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that it is not a question of whether or not a subaltern can speak, but whether or not she can be he

heard. Spivak writes, “The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” without the aid of an outside helper who will translate the needs and desires of the subaltern. Spivak continues, “When a line of communication is established between a member of a subaltern group and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony” (308–309). Cisneros’ s short story is that “line of communication” to the outside world. Although it is fiction, it is representational of true stories she has heard in her life.

Although “One Holy Night” and “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” are disconnected to each other, they work together to show how women survive in the stifling religious environments. In “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” , the *mestiza* experiences spiritual revelation wrought with freedom and power. In “One Holy Night” , a young girl is ruthlessly oppressed by religion. Cisneros uses these two stories to create a well rounded understanding of the issues Mexican and Mexican-American women are having with religion. Acknowledging both sides of the religious paradigm is paramount to understanding women’ s empowerment.

Chapter Four

Conclusion: New Cultures Emerge from the Chaos of Miscegenation

Studying the works of Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Gayatri Spivak allows readers to discover the power behind a woman's voice. Each writer has exposed cultural defects that need remedying. While it is up to the Mexican and Mexican-American woman to correct the social problems within her culture, all women can be an ally to her, should we happen to meet.

Currently, there are social issues directly related to both men and women within and outside of Mexican culture. Some of the gender stereotypes affixed to Mexican culture are also present in other cultures. The novels consider social issues that affect both men and women. Although the two genders may not share the same burdens, their burdens are directly related to each other.

The pressure for the man to be a provider of the family and the pressure of women to raise their sons have created an uncomfortable social system for those involved. By making small changes to the system, whether it be the education of women or permission for men to be more vulnerable and able to ask help from women, the Mexican and Mexican-American gender paradigm can change.

Furthermore, people must not continue to ignore, displace, and try to hide subalterns. Inocencio's illegitimate daughter, Candelaria, disappears in the novel when she is no longer useful to the Reyes family. Geraldo also disappears in the medical system because he may have been using a fake

name to protect his identity. The nameless narrator in “One Holy Night” disappears to Mexico for the shame of becoming pregnant at such a young age. There should be laws, institutions, and social groups to protect people like this in order to prevent similar tragedies from happening.

Acknowledging the problems within the system is the first step to correcting them. Gloria Anzaldúa’s suggestion is to create a new identity. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the new mestizo/mestiza contains all of the DNA from their ancestors, and hold the knowledge of all of the cultures that make them, but they are in charge of deciding who they are and what they will be.

Gayatri Spivak shows the audience how important it is to listen to voices outside of Europe. She does not think that European voices should be totally disregarded, but she wants to subvert the academic system and rely on voices outside of the European academic framework. The voices from the “Southern Hemisphere” will refresh and invigorate academia, without bringing attention back to Western ideologies.

Sandra Cisneros’s voice is the voice of a new mestiza. She writes from an American perspective as well as the perspective of a Mexican-American. She embraces both parts of her culture, and her characters and stories represent the needs of the mass mestizaje living on both sides of the border between the United States and Mexico.

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