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

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Abstract:

The article looks at various literary depictions of Chicana womanhood in Sandra Cisneros' fiction, employing Gloria Anzaldúa's theories according to which a subversion of the prevailing discourse is only possible by establishing a new ethno-feminist ethos. Mentally conditioned to accept restrictive and/or dichotomic illustrations of womanhood and physically confined to machismo-imposed gender-normative roles, the Chicana ethnocultural group still proves capable of rebellion against the violent misogyny and aggressively patriarchal values that pervade the Chicana/o community as a whole, which leads to a reclaiming of power and remolding of the Chicanas' very sense of self by means of empowerment though trauma.

Keywords: identity-altering trauma, contemporary Chicana fiction, border identity, new ethno-feminist ethos, empowerment though trauma.

"We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us."

—One of the Chicana/o Movement's most famous mottos

"A woman who writes has power. A woman who writes is feared. In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts."

Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*

1. Introduction

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

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

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

2. From traumatized femininity to radical Chicana feminism in Sandra Cisneros' fiction

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

Cisneros' fictional Chicanas go through the process of either constructing a previously inexistent identity or discovering a renewed perception of the self, as the readers are allowed to witness their becoming over several stages of their life, from adolescence to adulthood. The metamorphosis takes place on an individual level, usually including a sexual awakening, but also impact the community as a whole, helping a whole new collective conscience to develop.

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

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

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

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

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

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

For these female characters, marriage is not just a normal step, resulting from a process of emotional evolution, as they independently decide to leave their father's home and start a new life with the man they love. On the contrary, it appears to be a mere transition between one unfortunate situation to the next, in a scenario where the Chicana is little more than a piece of merchandise being exchanged between two people in positions of power:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ixchel's first sexual experience is an act of unconscious rebellion, a rejection of what her community's customs and traditions indicated as admirable and wise. Without even realizing, by taking control of her sexuality in this manner, she takes the first step towards her liberation from the confines of male-established boundaries. However, the symbolic rebellion is an insignificant progress if compared to the amount of abuse, violence, and misery that any given Chicana is subjected to in Cisneros' writings, one way or another. The physical infliction of pain is always complemented by psychological torment, leaving the woman traumatized on multiple levels, chipping away at her sense of self and stripping her of any genuine identity. At all times, the Chicana is property, left at the mercy of the male master, a victim of patriarchal dominance, with no right to protest her condition or any real chance to improve her circumstances—a caged bird:

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

3. Anzaldúa's Coatlicue *state: from in-community trauma to the poetics of rebellion*

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

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

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

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

Torn between her true Self (the innermost sense of identity she has developed as an offspring of the border) and the perceived self (the image of the ideal obedient self projected onto her by her community), Anzaldúa provides the reader with a perfect metaphor of her state of being by invoking the Mesoamerican goddess of creation, *Coatlalopeuh*, whose dual identity—part *Coatlicue*, an image of darkness, part *Tonantsi,* representing light—mirrors the her own twofold status as a rebellious Chicana of the border.

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

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

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

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

In her "Tongues of Fire: A Tribute to Gloria Anzaldúa," when speaking about the seminal impact that Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* have had in shaping an entire collective consciousness of empowerment and resistance, Maylei Blackwell inadvertently describes the process through which Anzaldúa manages to convert traumatic experiences into redeeming ones, integrating the traumatized self into the 'plural identity' construct which results from the Chicana's physical and symbolic existence in the borderlands:

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

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

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

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

4. Conclusion

As Richard A. García explains in his article, "Toward a Theory of Latina Rebirth," Anzaldúa's theorizations laid the groundwork for the retextualization of gender and reconceptualization of culture in a number of celebrated works by Chicana authors, such as Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. In the same vein as Julia Kristeva, Anzaldúa attempts a subversion of the prevailing discourse and longs to establish a new ethno-feminist ethos by redefining the Chicana experience altogether. Reflecting on the most significant Chicana writers' newly emerging visions and ideas—including the relationship between one's community and the self, the dynamics of gender-related power and control, heteronormativity, border identity, and ethnicity-generated crises of identity—, Anzaldúa draws from the acutely nationalist, separatist tropes so typical of the 1960s, also focusing on the responsibilities deriving from the mestiza status.

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

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

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

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

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

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