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“A Silence Between Us Like a Language”: The Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*

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…the cognitive level of language not only admits but directly requires recoding interpretation, that is, translation. Any assumption of ineffable or untranslatable cognitive data would be a contradiction in terms. But in jest, in dreams, in magic, briefly, in what one would call everyday verbal mythology, and in poetry above all...the question of translation becomes much more entangled and controversial...poetry by definition is untranslatable.... If we were to translate into English the traditional formula Traditore, traditore as “the translator is a betrayer,” we would deprive the Italian rhyming epigram of all its paronomastic value. Hence a cognitive attitude would compel us to change this aphorism into a more explicit statement and to answer the questions: translator of what messages? betrayer of what values?

—Roman Jakobson (435)

In jests, dreams, magic, poetry, and poetic prose, Sandra Cisneros finds abundant examples of the “everyday verbal mythology” of Mexican-American culture. Language and literacy as sites of cultural and class conflict, or what Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo describe as the “antagonistic” yet potentially “positive” relationship of minority to dominant linguistic and cultural codes (153), are critical matters in *Woman Hollering Creek*. The text includes frequent references to the specificity and difference coded into any and all languages; to the violence of inadequacy of translation and interpretation; to the translator’s and, by extension, the writer’s unfaithful role as betrayer of the culture’s inside secrets; and to the existence of encoded messages, which are more accessible to readers familiar with various insider codes and cryptographic devices deployed in the text.

These attributes Cisneros’s text shares with texts by other Chicano, Latino, and minority writers, who implicitly or explicitly refer to their own ambiguous relationships to both dominant and subordi-
nated cultures in their roles as translators and interpreters of minority experience. Novelists Arturo Islas in *The Rain God* and Ron Arias in *The Road to Tamazunchale* both refer to the surrender and resistance of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas to Spanish conquistadors; both also refer to the resulting cultural conflict and inner division of those whose heritage comes from the mixing and mating of the Amerindian and the European, and those whose native culture straddles the border separating, yet also joining Mexico and the United States. The Mexican legend of the traitorous interpreter, La Malinche, an almost subliminal allusion in Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (66-67) is directly invoked in Cisneros’s “Never Marry a Mexican.” The sublimated or subliminal cultural script is yet another one of the insider codes that minority, ethnic, and feminist writers may deploy in their texts. The repression of subordinated cultures and languages by the dominant culture and language is paralleled by, and frequently associated metonymically with, other repressed elements that erupt from the “unconscious” of the text to disturb, contradict, or at least complicate its conscious signification.

That Spanish operates both as an insider code comprehensible to some but not to others, and also as a repressed language in its subordination to English as the dominant language in the U.S., might be read as the primary signification of the entire text of *Woman Hollering Creek*. The reader again and again confronts the untranslatability of the subordinated cultural discourse into the language of the culturally dominant other: “[The poem is] Pretty in Spanish. But you’ll have to take my word for it. In English it just sounds goofy” (161). The beauty of the Spanish language is as untranslatable into English as the beauty of Flavio Minguia in “Bien Pretty” or Chato (fat-face), aka Chaq Uxmal Paloquin in “One Holy Night.” Their masculine beauty, like the poetry of the Spanish language, is simply unreadable to anyone using a dominant Aryan standard of beauty, or whose perceptions are limited by a heterosexist male gaze. The untranslatability of the beauty of Spanish, the unpronounceability of Spanish and Amerindian names on the gringo tongue, and the invisibility or discursive silencing of Chicanos are all figured in Cisneros’s text. Considering how Spanish is repressed in its subordination to English, Cisneros is also aware that Aztec, Mayan, Nahuatl, and other indigenous languages are repressed in turn by Spanish as Mexico’s official language, its dominance a legacy of European colonial conquest. Amerindian words may enter the text of a Chicano writer as yet another insider code. The fact that even dictionaries, lexicons, and grammars of these languages are largely accessible only to readers of Spanish, means that the use of such words can create an insider dis-
course within an insider discourse, of educated Mexican and Mexican-American writers and readers who, in the process of exploring their own origins, have investigated Mexico's indigenous roots.

Of course Spanish itself operates in the text as a sign of insider status, particularly the bilingual Spanglish which, in the equivocal description of Castillo's poet-narrator, is spoken "with an outrageous accent splattered with Chicanismos, one could only assume was not done with some intention" (54). One of Cisneros's characters, Cleofílás, calls the mixture "Spanish pocked with English," the latent metaphor, perhaps inadvertently, evoking disfigurement and disease (55). Particularly given "English Only" mandates, the backlash against bilingual education, and the resistance of U.S. publishers to bilingual texts, U.S.-born Chicanos sometimes express ambivalence about this language, while border-crossing Mexican-born artists, notably the poet Alurista and writer and performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, apparently have felt freer to sample in their work the hybrid offspring of Spanish and English.3

In a manner more subdued, given the pressure exerted by the audience of monolingual readers of English, the texts of Castillo, Cisneros, and other Chicano/Latino authors aesthetically and ideologically exploit the slippage of nonstandard dialects between error or deviation, and motivated or intentional differences arising from the historical and cultural distinctiveness of Spanglish, Tex-Mex, Inglenol, and Calo in relation to standard English as well as Castillian Spanish or standard Mexican Spanish. Like a joke or a Freudian slip of the tongue that reveals some unconscious truth, the linguistic "errors" of a character expose the repressed cultural conflict of the bilingual speaker: "But that's—how do you say it?—water under the damn? I can't ever get the sayings right even though I was born in this country. We didn't say shit like that in our house" (73).

From this ideologically contested space of linguistic difference, error, mutual incomprehension and antagonism, these bilingual authors have the potential to construct what might be regarded as a third language, accessible to those whose linguistic experience, combined with their formal education, has produced a new and emancipatory literacy. This new literacy, with its syncretic aesthetic, embraces elements excluded by the dominant standardized languages used in Mexico and the U.S. Thus, it frequently incorporates what, in standard dictionaries of English and Spanish, would be labeled as slang, argot, colloquialism, or nonstandard usage; or what is often excluded from dictionaries because it is generally excluded from written, as opposed to spoken, discourses. For Cisneros and others, such elements include nicknames, diminutives relegated to "baby
talk," the speech of children, and other intimate or familiar speech, nonstandard codes of subordinated minority cultures, folk references, obscenities, curses, as well as onomatopoeia, such as "¡zas!" and "rrrr, rrrrrr" (45).

Signaling its intentionality in its exploration of the significance of linguistic codes, which both include and exclude, Cisneros's text incorporates obvious uses of cryptography, such as the poet's acrostic coding of the name of his beloved within the narrative text of "Tin Tan Tan"; in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises"; the use of a code substituting numerals for letters, that disguises the homoerotic content of a message included among other prayers—in Spanish, English, and Spanglish—inscribed as ex votos in a Mexican-American Catholic church; or, less obviously, the coded usage of Hispanic names one might (or because of cultural silencing perhaps might not) find stitched into the AIDS quilt in "Remember the Alamo." In this last story, the 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.5

Cryptic encodings of names and secret messages in the literary text privilege the literate over the illiterate, since they have no oral equivalent outside of literate discourses. Yet other encodings, while included in a literary discourse, refer to the "experience of the other" (Freire and Macedo 12). This discourse of the other includes illiteracy and orality, superstition and folk culture, ignorance and resistance. The conflict and potential dialogue of usually antagonistic domains, to which Cisneros is acutely sensitive, influence her approach, as a poet and fiction writer, in addressing an audience of bilingual readers of Spanish and English, as well as monolingual English readers.

As a highly educated writer, Cisneros is aware of the dominant canon from which her work deliberately and self-consciously deviates. As a Chicana of working class background, she acknowledges and refers in her text to the linguistic and cultural practices of those usually excluded from dominant literate discourses. As "the daughter of a Mexican father" who gave her the language of tenderness ("quien me dio el lenguaje de la ternura") and "a Mexican-American mother" who "gave [her] the fierce language," Cisneros grew up exquisitely attuned to the vigor of ethnically inflected working class
English and the emotional resonances and intimacies of colloquial, familial Spanish.6

Ay! To make love in Spanish.... To have a lover sigh mi vida, mi precios, mi chiquitita, and whisper things in that language crooned to babies, that language murmured by grandmothers, those words that smelled like your house, like flour tortillas, and the inside of your daddy’s hat, like everyone talking in the kitchen at the same time.... That language.... Nothing sounded dirty or hurtful or corny. How could I think of making love in English again? (153)

If, for J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man, “deconstruction” and “unreadability” name “what is learned” and also, contrarily, the uncertainty or “undecidability” of determining any factual knowledge of cognitive data in a literary text, then for the ethnic text, what is learned—and what is never entirely fixed as certain, translatable knowledge—is always not only who I am, but also who we are. 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. It is left to the reader to know or infer that “Chavela” is a nickname for “Isabel,” as “Chayo” is short for “Rosario,” and “Chucha” for “Jesua”; or to fathom the subtle distinctions enunciated by “Patty,” “la Patee,” or “Patrrri-see-ah,” as opposed to “Trish” (37). Cisneros delights in the fact that even underpants, calzones in standard Spanish, have a baby talk nickname, chones, a word that, for those who know the language, automatically signals the informality and intimacy of familiar speech (5). As in the stories titled “La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta,” “Los Boxers” and “Bien Pretty,” the suggestive balancing of English and Spanish in the bilingual title of “My Tocaya” (“My Namesake”) privileges the creative syncretism of the bilingual speaker’s English-jangled Spanish and Spanish-entangled English, just as the signification of names and naming is privileged cultural discourse. While initially distancing herself from “Trish,” the narrator considers her linguistic and cultural kinship with her tocaya reason enough to critique her behavior from a communal perspective.

Characters like Trish, the scandalous Carmen Berriozabal of “La Fabulosa,” Rosario, Clemencia, and Cleofilas, all attempt to escape narrow constraints defining women’s experience. They are the wayward and wandering ones, whose names are mentioned in gossip, tabloid headlines, and prayers. The risk of waywardness is indicated
by the unidentified dead girl in “My Tocaya” (40). In contrast to Cisneros’s first work of fiction, The House on Mango Street, which depicts a community of women restricted in their movements within the barrio, confined to interior spaces, and trapped in their domestic roles as daughters, wives, and mothers—with only the child narrator Esperanza (her name means Hope) escaping—Woman Hollering Creek offers stories of a variety of women trying various means of escape, through resistance to traditional female socialization, through sexual and economic independence, self-fashioning, and feminist activism, as well as through fantasy, prayer, magic, and art. Cisneros’s most complex characters are those who, like adult Esperanzas, have left and returned to the barrio as artists. For them, art is a powerfully seductive way of “Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that’s not power, what is?” (75). In “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” and “La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta,” characters who speak from within the community look askance at others who shed their “name-sake” status and intimacy when they call themselves “Hispanic” or “Spanish” (rather than “Latino,” “Mexican,” or “Chicana”) for the sake of assimilation, upward mobility, or winning government grants.

The inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the name “Mexican” is explored in “Never Marry a Mexican”; and the candies hidden by the Chicana protagonist inside the possessions of another woman constitute another cryptic communication. Like the perplexing advice of the narrator’s mother, which gives the story its title, the candy bears are an example of the ambiguous signification of coded, hidden, or double messages. Clemencia hides candy “gummy bears” in intimate places where they are sure to be found and interpreted as a message from a sexual rival by the “scary Dallas type” wife of the narrator’s lover (79). Clemencia’s act of sabotage, a parody of insemination and impregnation, in which the seemingly impregnable complacency of the wife is penetrated, indicates the narrator’s possessiveness toward her rival’s husband and child, as well as Clemencia’s ambivalent desire to escape representations of woman as sexual object, passive reproductive vessel, and compliant consumer, in favor of an alternative, self-authored, and subversive inscription as desiring subject and productive cultural agent.

Paradoxically, Clemencia is most “Mexican” when she acts out her rage in private rituals that connect her to cultural figures symbolizing women’s destructive aspect. A gummy bear is substituted for the “tiniest baby inside” of Megan’s nesting Russian “wooden babushka dolls.” Clemencia symbolically drowns “the baby” in a muddy creek, as if re-enacting La Llorona’s infanticide (81-82). At an extratextual
level, the gummy bear has an idiosyncratic symbolic resonance for Cisneros. According to the author, “an upside-down gummy bear” resembles “a Mexican statue of Coatlicue.” Thus, by inversion, the sugary sweet candy that the artist-protagonist plants like a poison pill in the boudoir of her rival connects her to the creative/destructive potential invested in the Aztec phallic mother goddess Coatlicue, as her cryptic communication resonates with the ambiguous signification of the traitorous translator Malintzin Tenepal/La Malinche/Donna Marina. Malintzin was betrayed by her own mother, who sold her daughter into slavery to protect her son’s inheritance; and Malintzin, who served as La Lengua [the tongue] for Hernan Cortes, is silenced in Mexican and Spanish histories despite the extraordinary linguistic abilities that made her an agent of historical and cultural transformation. She who was active and indispensable as La Lengua becomes utterly passive and disposable as La Chingada, the one who got screwed: no virgin mother of immaculate conception, but mother of the new mestizo race and culture of Mexico.

As the meaning of childbearing gets gummed up when women’s reproduction is defined and controlled within racist and patriarchal structures, a “gummy bear” candy signifies polyvalently, if not quite undecipherably. Clemencia subverts conventional social uses of candy as a means by which a (usually male) lover communicates affection to his beloved or as a gift given by a father to celebrate the birth of a daughter. Bearing a male child, being “white” and legally wed to Drew—and thus, by virtue of her birth, marriage, and reproductive labor, occupying a more secure class position—all make Megan an unforgivable enemy for the self-made woman Clemencia, whose refusal to marry signals both her rebellion and her search for autonomy as a woman unprotected by patriarchy, at the same time that it confirms her obedience as a daughter following her mother’s counsel.

While on the surface it seems unequivocal, her mother’s advice is actually cryptic, ambiguous, and certainly ironic, in part because “Mexican” frequently is used to refer not only to Mexican nationals but also to naturalized and native born U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. So it is uncertain who exactly are the “Mexicans” Clemencia’s mother warned her against. Perhaps she meant only: Be sure not to marry a man like your father. Clemencia cannot forgive her mother for marrying an Anglo after her father’s death. Her mother’s advice might mean: Never marry a man born in Mexico. Clemencia herself is the offspring of a bourgeois Mexican father and a working class Mexican-American mother. In this story, “Mexican” operates chiefly as a sign of difference, whether it is a difference of nationality or national origin; of culture, language, or class; or even of gender, since
(presumably) the "Mexicans" Clemencia is warned not to marry are all men. Yet the same term is also a sign of equivalence, since "Mexican" can be interpreted to include Clemencia and her mother, as well as the husband and father who was born in Mexico.

Then again, her mother’s advice might mean: marry a man who is not of Mexican descent. Or more specifically: marry an Anglo, as the mother did when given a second chance. The erotically adventurous Clemencia behaves as if she had heard only the first two words of the admonition: never marry. Although she says she is “too romantic for marriage,” she also prides herself on being something of a sexual outlaw, never a captive bride in the prison of marriage: have “Mexican” lovers, but refrain from marry any of them (69). It is unlikely that is what her mother meant, but from a rebellious daughter’s perspective, it is a plausible, if subversive, interpretation. The mother’s advice to her daughter and her second marriage to an Anglo and Clemencia’s own sexual independence, all point to a possible equation of “Mexican” with a set of culturally specific gender roles and rules, from which both mother and daughter, in different ways, seek to distance themselves.

When the U.S. born Clemencia considers her own sexual freedom and social mobility, the category “Mexican” excludes her, but expands to include any man of Latino heritage, particularly if he is working class. She dismisses from consideration the entire catalogue of Latino men. However, when it comes to her affair with a Texas yuppie, the meaning of “Mexican” suddenly doubles back to include Clemencia herself, thereby excluding her from the range of women suitable for marriage to Drew. She is blessed and cursed with fulfillment of her own rebellious wish: to be lover or mistress only, never a wife. As she contemplates her status as discarded lover in relation to Megan, her sexual rival, Clemencia imagines Drew explaining to his wife the trail of tell-tale gummy bears, with a fabrication about the superstitious Mexican house cleaner. Having believed that as an artist she was positioned outside of the hierarchical division of socioeconomic classes, or possibly moved upward through her relationship with Drew, Clemencia gets her comeuppance by finding herself his servant. At most, she can hold onto her relationship to Drew only through her role as his son’s instructor, a role she vengefully subverts by seducing the boy, as she herself had been seduced as Drew’s student.

While the author insists that Drew is Anglo—clearly he is Anglo-identified—this reader sees nothing in the text that definitely fixes his ethnicity. Even Clemencia’s statement, “I love it when you speak to me in any language,” implying that Drew is not a native Spanish
SANDRA CISNEROS'S WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK

speaker, oddly echoes the narrator of "Eyes of Zapata," who says to Emiliano, "you spoke to us in our language" (106). While "Eyes of Zapata" is of necessity written in English, with a sprinkling of Spanish words evocative of the landscape and culture of Mexico, this statement reminds the reader that the text is not only the author's imaginative construction of the voice of Zapata's lover, but is also a translation of that imagined voice into a different language, since the narrator would actually address her lover, the Mexican revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata, in Mexican Spanish. Ironically, her abandonment by her lover and isolation from her people, despite a common language and shared belief in the revolution, is echoed by the rejection and loneliness of the alienated Clemencia.

"Never Marry a Mexican" might be seen to reflect current debates concerning the proper naming of Mexican-Americans and other Latinos. Having largely jettisoned a prior designation as "Spanish" people, which seemed to signal a Eurocentric orientation while repressing indigenous Amerindian roots, the question remains whether U.S. Hispanics (a census category melding together people of diverse racial and national origins) desire to be counted as "white" people, and thus assimilable into the dominant culture of the U.S., as Linda Chavez counsels; or as a "brown" or "bronze" raza, and thus members of the global majority of "people of color," the identification preferred by many who designate themselves Chicanos or Latinos rather than Hispanics. At the least, the question of identity is a challenge for people whose culture resists Anglicization.

In addition to her portraits of the artist as a Chicana, Cisneros is concerned with representing the silenced and marginalized, including children, homosexuals, and working class and immigrant Chicanos and Mexicanos, whose stories have been untold or untranslated. Her particular focus on the silencing of women is signaled in the title story, "Woman Hollering Creek." The creek called "La Gritona" is reminiscent of popular folktales about "La Llorona," a nameless tragic woman who drowned herself and her children. The creek, the border, and the telenovelas define the mythic spaces given to Cleofilas in her fantasies of escape from a battering husband. The cultural scripts associated with each space offer her different escape fantasies: homicide and/or suicide, like La Llorona; dramatic border crossings, like the escape of an outlaw desperado from the U.S. into Mexico, or the crossings of mojados and smuggler coyotes; or telenovelas, soap operas that provide the escape of entertainment. Cisneros creates a new destiny in a story that revises all three of these cultural scripts, allowing Cleofilas a realistic escape with the help of Chicana feminist activists. Translating from "La Llorona" (weeping woman) to "La Gri-
HARRYETTE MULLEN

tona” (shouting woman) to the English “Woman Hollering Creek” allows a greater set of possibilities for interpreting the cry of the restless spirit. With its haunting sound of wind and water, the creek speaks with an enigmatic voice—crying, weeping, wailing, shouting, hollering “like Tarzan,” perhaps even laughing—a voice too often denied in traditional representations of Latinas (55-56). Paradoxically, “La Llorona,” a woman silenced in life, wails her grief in death. Cleofilas learns to decode a feminist message of survival in the haunted voice of the creek that hollers with the rage of a silenced woman. Much as Chicana feminists have revised folklore, legend, and myth to open up possibilities for new representations of women, the activism of Felice and her compañeras helps Cleofilas to reinterpret the message of La Gritona, translating her voice from a wail, to a holler, to a shout, to laughter; from an arroyo associated with a tragic legend to “a creek...full of happily ever after” (47).

Searching for and validating folk and popular articulations often excluded from “the literary,” Cisneros employs throughout the entire text of Woman Hollering Creek a network of epigraphs taken, not from the literary traditions of the United States or Europe or Latin America, but instead from Mexican ballads and romantic popular songs that circulate throughout, and indeed help to constitute, Spanish-speaking communities through dissemination of recordings, through jukeboxes located in restaurants and nightclubs located (along with tortillerias, mercados, cines, and botanicas) in Latino neighborhoods, and through Spanish-language radio stations broadcasting to cities or geographic regions with large Spanish-speaking populations. Cisneros privileges such commercial/cultural sites in which commodities and services are aimed at a culturally specific clientele, such as the cinemas devoted to the showing of films from Mexico or telenovelas, soap operas, produced for Mexican television and syndicated in the U.S.

The church functions similarly, as a cultural as well as religious site: specifically as a site of origin for insider discourses specific to Mexican-American and other Latino cultures, through the exchange of prayers and religious services for offerings made and thanks given by devout Catholics whose religion syncretically embraces folk beliefs. Cisneros recognizes and acknowledges the prayers of ordinary people addressing the Christian God, Catholic saints fused with Aztec goddesses, and even African deities, as a folk discourse worthy of inclusion in a literary text of an emergent minority literature. As Rosario offers her braid to the Virgin in thanks for the opportunity to become an artist rather than a mother, Cisneros offers her book (with its elaborate list of acknowledgments to family, friends, colleagues,
SANDRA CISNEROS’S WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK

la Divina Providencia, and Virgen de Guadalupe Tonantzín) as a kind of literary ex voto devoted to Chicano culture. Her text associates this folk genre with the religious articles and folk healing paraphernalia referred to in “Anguiano Religious Articles,” “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” and “Bien Pretty.” These religious or quasi-religious cultural sites, like such fixtures of U.S. commercial culture as Kwik Wash laundromats, K-Mart, Woolworth’s, Cash N Carry, Luby’s Cafeteria, and flea markets where fire-damaged Barbie doll Dream Houses can be purchased by families who could not afford to buy them even at K-Mart, are markers of class and gender, as well as sites for the reproduction of the dominant culture and the production of a resistant ethnic minority culture, which is neither entirely of the U.S. nor Mexico.

Permitting unstudied inscriptions of folk practice and entrepreneurial flair, associated with religious and secular sites of cultural production, to enter and influence her text is the author’s conscious choice, signaling the intersection of aesthetic and ideological concerns. Cisneros asserts that selectively “allowing what comes in from the neighborhood” to inscribe itself within her own writing practice can change the course of a story as it is written. 10 “The story was transformed” when the author incorporated into the manuscript of what became “Bien Pretty” the text of an advertising flyer left by a local exterminator, and Flavio Munguia, unschooled poet and slayer of cockroaches, was born. As a working-class organic intellectual, secure in his Mexican identity, he gently challenges the self-conscious Chicanismo of the narrator, Guadalupe (Lupe/Lupita), a new age bohemian artist. Her name invokes La Virgen de Guadalupe as a cultural symbol, as in the naming of San Antonio’s Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, a site of contact between artists and the local Mexican-American community.

Through the relationship of Flavio and Lupe, through the dialogue implied by the juxtaposition of “Tin Tan Tan” with “Bien Pretty,” as well as through the author’s willingness to allow the barrio in some sense to collaborate in the writing of her text, Cisneros suggests a complex interaction of artist and community. Nourished by poetry, as Lupe is fed by her painting (145, 147), Flavio represents the indigenous creativity and cultural “authenticity” of the barrio, on which the trained artist relies for inspiration. Perhaps attracted by the playful rhyme advertising the pest control services of La Cucaracha Apachurrada [The Squashed Cockroach], Lupe hires him as an exterminator, then offers him a job as artist’s model, “Because you have such a wonderful Face” (143-44). Despite the threat that Lupe will objectify him, Flavio accepts, already imagining “what kind of story” he can
make of the adventure. At first, he seems more committed to Lupe’s project than she herself. He arrives ahead of her at the garage studio, “like if he was the one painting me” (148).

Like Chaq Uxmal Paloquin in “One Holy Night,” Flavio’s Amerindian features seem to the narrator exotically, genuinely Mexican (29). “I’m thinking...you might be the perfect Prince Popo for a painting I’ve had kicking around in my brain” (143). While Chaq, who bragged of descent from “an ancient line of Mayan kings,” turns out to be plain old Chato, with “no Mayan blood,” Flavio has the “face of a sleeping Olmec...heavy Oriental eyes, thick lips and wide nose...profile carved from onyx” (27, 33, 144). His bona fide Mexican identity, paradoxically indicated by Asian and African features, is partially confirmed for Lupe by the intimacies exchanged when they “make love in Spanish.” However, the “true test” of authenticity is, significantly, a cry of pain: “When Flavio accidentally hammered his thumb, he never yelled ‘Ouch!’ he said ‘Ay!’ The true test of a native Spanish speaker” (153). Their tempestuous affair refigures, as it regenders, the dynamic encounter of the explorer artist with the indigenous creativity of the community. Here, the result is the artist’s revisioning of an Aztec myth visualized in popular Mexican-American culture in countless velvet paintings, barrio murals, custom vans, and complimentary calendars “like the ones you get at Carnicería Ximenez or Tortillería Guadalupanita” (144). When Lupe learns that he has a wife in Mexico, she represses and sublimates her “uncontrollable desire to drive over to Flavio Munguía’s house with [her] grandmother’s molcajete and bash in the skull” (157). Instead of pounding him with the stone mortar inherited from her abuelita’s kitchen, she returns to her art work with a new inspiration, as well as an empowering feminist vision:

Went back to the twin volcano painting. Got a good idea and redid the whole thing. 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)

For middle-class characters, such as the narrators of “Bien Pretty” and “Never Marry a Mexican,” particular forms of identification with Mexican and Chicano cultures are indicated through specific modes of commodity consumption—as well as through self-conscious appropriations from working class, immigrant, and folk cultural production. The ironic humor with which they adorn themselves and decorate their homes with folk and kitsch artifacts signi-
fies their middle class acculturation and privilege, as much as it indicates their attempt to escape or transcend class through self-fashioning: identifying as an artist, bohemian, new age hippie, or, like Gomez-Pena, an ethnically specific “hipiteca”; living in or near the barrio; patronizing local ethnic businesses; and blending culturally specific and syncretic spiritual practices with new age eco-feminist spiritualism. Cisneros’s use of irony, humor, inversion, parody, deliberate transgression and strategic revision of cultural scripts, problematizes ethnic authenticity.11 Figuring the artist-intellectual as female, desiring subject, and the community as male, desired object also complicates the signification of identity, as gender further complicates the artist’s cultural and class identification and inverts a previous gender coding found in the male-dominated cultural production of the emergent Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.12

“Bien Pretty” and “Never Marry a Mexican” are narrated by women artists, each pulled in a different direction by desire: Lupe toward the native intelligence of the community; Clemencia toward a seductive “Cortez” who introduces her to the world of “the rich, who come to [her] exhibitions and buy [her] work” (72). While Clemencia describes her class position as “amphibious,” Lupe stresses her activist credentials as a supporter of farmworkers: “[We] go back a long way. Back to the grape-boycott demonstrations in front of the Berkeley Safeway. And I mean the first grape strike” (71, 141). Clemencia regards her work as a translator as “a form of prostitution,” while Lupe insists on the untranslatability of certain Spanish terms, like la fulana, and prefers the sound of the word urracas to its English equivalent “grackles” (71, 150, 164).13 Each has faced a gabacha [nemesis]: the blonde whom Lupe calls “la otra” (inscribing the “white” woman as “the other”); and the “red-headed Barbie doll” who is the recipient of Clemencia’s miniature Coatlicues (142, 79).

For both women, art is revenge, therapy, magic, affirmation, and power. Clemencia obsessively paints and repaints portraits of her pale-skinned lover to gain power over something she “drew.” Lupe’s encounter with Flavio inspires her to confront her blank canvas; to challenge restrictive gender codes and cultural inscriptions; to possess, and inscribe her desire upon, the body of her lover, a body already imprinted with tattooed names of other women. Lupe “rewrites” her relationship to Flavio, as “Bien Pretty” rewrites “Tin Tan Tan.” She boldly repositions herself in relation to the folk, who are both inscribers and themselves inscribed. Both Lupe, the proud Chicana, and Clemencia, the confessed Malinchista, perform art as brujería, or “Mexican voodoo” (81, 158). Their powers link them to the spellbinding sorcery of the narrator of “Eyes of Zapata,” whose
words “can charm” and “can kill,” but who, nevertheless, is abandoned by her lover and the revolution (105). With their relative privilege and power offset by their gender and their marginal status in both Anglo and Hispanic cultures, Clemencia feels betrayed by “Cortez,” Lupe by her “Prince Popo.”

The implicit contradictions in the artist’s appreciation of, and identification with, the folk culture of immigrants and working class Chicanos are demonstrated in these two stories; and the possible naïveté of such a position is explored. Clemencia self-consciously notes her idealization and possible infantilization of barrio culture, which she may have associated with her own childhood before she took on her adult identity of cosmopolitan artist-intellectual: “The barrio looked cute in the daytime, like Sesame Street.” She is aware that she has romanticized the barrio where there are “more signs in Spanish than in English” (72). As a painter, she cultivates an aesthetic appreciation for the popular culture and folk life of working class and immigrant Chicanos and learns, ambivalently and complexly, both to identify with and to dissociate herself from “Mexicans.”

Lupe, the nomadic narrator of “Bien Pretty,” an artist turned arts administrator, humorously contrasts her own meager possessions with the grand inventory of cultural and aesthetic artifacts that contributes to the Frida Kahlo-inspired decor of the house she sublets from a successful Chicana artist. As a tenant, surrounded by someone else’s possessions, in a house strategically located “where the peasantry lives— but close enough to the royal mansions” of a historic district—she measures her own poverty, or rather, her bohemian rootlessness and marginality (139). Confronted by Flavio, who forces her to admit to herself, “I was not Mexican,” she feels her own inauthenticity, or rather her cultural hybridity (152). Yet she is rich in self-confidence once she makes the commitment to her painting.

If Rosario of the milagritos is the potential Chicana artist struggling from the cocoon of familial and communal expectations, Lupe and Clemencia are intense, brave butterflies, so deeply imbued with a sense of beauty and purpose that no heartache can deter them from their art. Such stories and characters, juxtaposed as they are with stories of poor, immigrant, and working class Chicanos and Mexicanos, draw the reader’s attention, not only to the conflict of Hispanic and Anglo cultures and their respective linguistic codes, but also to tensions within Latino communities, of race, class, gender, and ideology; and of unequal access to education, bilingual instruction, literacy, class mobility, and the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship.

Cisneros’s text registers tensions implicit in a community where the border between the U.S. and Mexico is reproduced within the
psyche of the individual, and where the “Mericans” are also the “Mexicans.” The computer spell checker suggests “Mexican” as a substitute for “Merican,” Cisneros’s paragrammatic truncation of “American.” The alteration, like translation, makes distinct signifiers equivalent. The words are equal in length if not identical in meaning. After all, Mexicans are Americans and, as the North American Free Trade Agreement reminds those who needed reminding, Mexico is part of North America. The spell checker also suggests “Moroccan” as a possible replacement for the unrecognized word, but that is another story.14

Notes

1. This essay is dedicated to Sandra Cisneros, with appreciation for time so generously spent discussing her work with me; and to Katheryn Rios, for her inspiring scholarship, and for the many pleasurable conversations that have led me to the questions I pursue here. I am particularly indebted in my reading of “Never Marry a Mexican.” Needless to say, any misapprehensions are entirely my own.
   My conversation with the author took place in San Antonio, Texas, October 2, 1993. The quotation in my title is from her story: “Eyes of Zapata” (99).

2. In Castillo’s epistolary novel, one of the narrator’s fantasies is to become an interpreter and assistant for her lover, an affluent Mexican who proposes marriage and then jilts her. Castillo’s text, like the legend of Malintzin, centers on betrayal. However, its feminist theme keeps the focus on women’s betrayal of themselves and each other, as they struggle for true sisterhood. Similar reconfigurations and inversions of myth and legend, frequently involving re-articulations of gender codes, are found in the work of Chicana lesbians, particularly Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua. Contemporary Mexicana and Chicana artists and intellectuals, generally, have been busy revising and re-interpreting cultural texts that have defined, and sometimes confined, Mexican and Mexican-American women through representations of traditional figures such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, Tonantzin, Coatlicue, Ixtaccihuatl, La Malinche, and La Llorana.

3. For a lively discussion of bilingualism in the U.S., see James Crawford, Hold Your Tongue: Bilingualism and the Politics of “English Only.”

4. The acrostic in “Tin Tan Tan,” spelling Guadalupe’s nickname, Lupita, in a text attributed to “Rogelio Velasco” (the euphonious pseudonym of Flavio Munguia of “Bien Pretty”) also serves as a clue to the reader to connect the two stories. As insider codes, nickname and pen name operate differently to create alternative identities through familiarization and defamiliarization. The working class poet Flavio gives himself a romantic, grandiloquent nom de plume, while addressing his estranged lover Guadalupe with the intimate, diminutive form of her name.

5. Such omissions from histories of the past have begun to be addressed in contemporary scholarship, with the results making their way, not without controversy, into popular media and multicultural school curricula. Thanks in part to the Institute of Texan Cultures, one can now find in Texas bookstores and school libraries a series of pamphlets on the contributions of various ethnic
groups to the history of the state, including Texans of Spanish, Mexican, English, African, German, Irish, Czech, Swedish, Polish, Danish, Belgian, and Japanese descent.

“The Names Project,” also known as “The AIDS Quilt,” was undertaken to bring attention to AIDS deaths and the marginalization of people with AIDS and HIV. The project has resulted in the construction of a huge quilt-like patchwork memorializing people who have died of AIDS. Cisneros used invented names in “Remember the Alamo,” but for a theater piece that combined parts of this story with parts of “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” she incorporated into the performance a recitation of names of local AIDS casualties (Conversation with the author).

6. Unpaginated front and back matter: dedication and note “About the Author.”
7. Conversation with the author.
8. In conversation, Cisneros made it clear that, while she deliberately centers Mexican-American and Mexican protagonists in her stories, she intended Drew to be Anglo, which she indicated by giving him “one of those typical Texas Anglo names—those names like Drew, or Dwight.” His Anglo identity, according to the author, is reinforced by Clemencia’s reference to the Spanish he spoke as “my language,” rather than “our language” as in “Eyes of Zapata.” Still, I would argue that the text moves even further than the author herself is willing to go in exploring the fictiveness of identity. Textually, the precise denotation of “Mexican” drifts, until it becomes a kind of floating signifier. Clemencia’s lover, Drew, even with his Anglo name, his Anglo wife, and his acquisition of Spanish as a second language, quite conceivably might have been a white and/or light-skinned assimilated Hispanic, particularly in a text that demonstrates the flexible inclusiveness of the word “Mexican” and hints at the pragmatism underlying the bureaucratic construction of “Hispanic”—a designation that would include a fair-skinned European Cortes, for instance. For a member of an ethnic minority, marriage to an affluent Anglo might offer a more direct path to assimilation and social status, as out-marriage, intermarriage with members of the dominant group, is a leading indicator of a minority group’s acculturation and acceptability within the dominant culture. In a white supremacist culture, the ability of immigrants and minorities to “pass as white,” marry “white,” and reproduce “white” offspring is an index of assimilability. The privilege associated with a “white” appearance, and the stigma of looking “too dark” certainly affect the behavior of “whites,” as well as “people of color,” reinforcing preferences for pale complexions, blue eyes, and blond hair. Clemencia, imagining herself as Malinalli, sees Drew as her Cortes. Thus it might not seem farfetched to imagine Drew as a white European American of Hispanic descent, a foil to Clemencia, as the character Alicia is to the Chicana protagonist of Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters*.

9. Linda Chavez, *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation*. In this book, in public speeches, and in radio and television broadcasts, Chavez advocates for Hispanics the melting pot model derived from the experience of white ethnic immigrants from Europe. By concentrating on Mexican-Americans, whom she regards unequivocally as “Caucasian,” and thus assimilable, Chavez seems deliberately to exclude or ignore those Hispanics (including many Mexican-Americans) who are not “white,” or who could not, or would not “pass as white” in the U.S. race/color/class hierarchy. For an alternative perspective, see Gladys M. Jimenez-Munoz, “The Elusive Signs of African-ness: Race and Representation Among Latinas in the United States.”
10. Conversation with the author.
11. Katheryn L. Rios, "And you know what I have to say isn't always pleasant': Translating the Unspoken Word in Cisneros' Woman Hollering Creek," Chicana (W)rites on Word and Film.

12. Clemencia and Lupe illustrate two possible feminist responses to masculinist constructions of Chicano culture. Clemencia rejects Latinos as undesirable sexual partners, while Lupe complicates the gendered cultural script through deliberate inversion of cultural norms, or "flipping the script," as female rappers Salt-N-Pepa call it. A similar feminist inversion, a refiguring of the discovery of Mexico as the Latina's search for cultural roots, occurs in Ana Castillo's The Mixquiahuala Letters. Two Hispanic women from the U.S., Teresa, a Mexican-American mestiza, and Alicia, a "white girl of the suburbs" whose ancestors include an Andalusian gypsy (and whose ability to pass as a Puerto Rican results in her coerced sterilization in a New York City public health clinic), cross the border seeking the authentic "utopic" Mexico. The women search for traces of pre-conquest civilizations, exploring ruins of ancient Aztec and Mayan empires. They are often frustrated as they seek a spiritual connection to Mexico through encounters with assorted Mexican men, including the "Indian caretaker" Adan (Adam) and a variety of ambiguous "brujos," such as Wolfgang, whose mother is Zapotec, and a group of young engineers who hold seances in a "haunted" house.

13. Readers who know the poetry of Wallace Stevens will recognize an allusion to his blackbird, as well as the author's celebration of her bilingual aesthetic: "Ururacas. Grackles. Urracas. Different ways of looking at the same bird. City calls them grackles, but I prefer urracas. That roll of the r making all the difference" (164).

14. Gomez-Pena notes, in Warrior for Gringostroika, that identities may be read and interpreted quite differently, depending on location and context. Resembling a "darker" father with a "quintessential mestizo look" more than a mother who "was as white as can be," Gomez-Pena is rather consistently perceived as a person of color, an immigrant, or a dark racial "other": "Depending on the context, I can be a Mexican, a post-Mexican, a Chicano, a chica-lango (half-chicano and half-chilango), a Latin American, a trans-American, or an American—in the widest sense of the term. When I go to Europe, things get even more complicated. In England I am considered 'Black' along with all Indians, Pakistanis, and Afro-Caribbeans. In France I am often mistaken for Algerian; and in Belgium, Switzerland, and Germany, I ipso facto become a Turk, a Greek, or a Yugoslavian Gypsy" (16, 21).

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