Jacqueline Doyle

Haunting the Borderlands:
La Llorona in Sandra Cisneros's
"Woman Hollering Creek"

Aiîîî aiîîî aiîîî
She is crying for her dead child
the lover gone, the lover not yet come:
Her grito splinters the night
— Gloria Anzaldúa, "My Black Angelos,"
Borderlands/La Frontera

"If I were asked what it is I write about," Sandra Cisneros commented in a lecture in 1986, "I would have to say I write about those ghosts inside that haunt me, that will not let me sleep, of that which even memory does not like to mention." Poverty, the unrecorded lives of the powerless, the unheard voices of "thousands of silent women," are some of the ghosts that haunt The House on Mango Street, dedicated in two languages, "A las Mujeres/To the Women." Cisneros's narrator Esperanza chronicles the unhappy histories of "the ones who cannot out," women immobilized by poverty, cultural and linguistic barriers, restrictive gender roles, and domestic violence. Gazing out of windows they cannot open, standing in doorways they cannot exit, woman after woman on Mango Street is trapped at the threshold or boundary of a room or house not her own. Marin moons in the doorway, "waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life." Mamacita "sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show," afraid to go outside because she doesn't speak English. Because Rafaela is young and beautiful, her husband locks her in her room each Tuesday night while he plays dominoes. Minerva comes over each week "black and blue" with the "same story." Sally claims her father "never hits [her]
hard,” but she marries to escape, only to sit alone in her husband’s house “because she is afraid to go outside without his permission.” She looks “at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake.”

The story of Cleófilas in Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek” extends and revises such histories, opening a borderland space where old myths take on new resonance and new forms and where new stories are possible. Haunted by the legendary wail of la Llorona, Cleófilas seeks a language to articulate her own story and the stories of the mute feminine victims of male violence in the newspapers. As Adrienne Rich writes in “Natural Resources,” “we have lived with violence so long”:

Am I to go on saying
for myself, for her
This is my body
take and destroy it?^5

Reconstituting the “communion of saints” as a community including women, Cisneros transfigures the grito of la Llorona and mines new natural resources for the expectant mother Cleófilas and her sisters and comadres. Felice’s joyous holler as she and Cleófilas cross Woman Hollering Creek releases new mother tongues. “What kind of talk was that coming from a woman,” Cleófilas marvels of her border crossing. “But then again, Felice was like no woman she’d ever met. Can you imagine, when we crossed the arroyo she just started yelling like a crazy, she would later say to her father and brothers. Just like that. Who would’ve thought?”^6

In an interview in 1988, Cisneros discussed the difficulties of growing up as a Mexican American woman, “always straddling two countries . . . but not belonging to either culture,” “trying to define some middle ground” where revision and reinvention of cultural and sexual roles might be possible, only to be “told you’re a traitor to your culture.”^7 Gloria Anzaldúa constructs her “new mestiza identity” in just such a “middle ground” or borderland area, where languages, cultures, religions, and gender identities collide and cross. The “borderlands,” as Anzaldúa defines them, encompass both geographic and psychic spaces, a polyglot interzone that is “physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.”^8 This borderland terrain exists both inside and outside the
individual; Anzaldúa maps the competing cultural, national, racial, sexual, and linguistic discourses occupying the spaces within and surrounding the Mexican American woman, even as she undoes the static oppositions that would confine and immobilize her. Moving beyond the “virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy,” Anzaldúa reconstructs mestiza identity as dynamic and multiple, the borderlands as a region of constant transition and transformation, where “languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized . . . die and are born.” The new mestiza speaks “a forked tongue, a variation of two languages” and numerous dialects. “She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths.” She remothers herself and refashions her gods to give birth to her own identity.

The issue of “redefining myself or controlling my own destiny or my own sexuality,” Cisneros said in an interview, is the “ghost I’m still wrestling with.” In the stories in Woman Hollering Creek, Cisneros reshapes the myths that define Chicana identity, conjuring the ghostly apparitions of what Anzaldúa calls “Our Mothers”: la Virgen de Guadalupe, la Malinche, la Llorona. Norma Alarcón compellingly argues that these highly charged “symbolic figures” have been used as “reference point[s] not only for controlling, interpreting, or visualizing women” in Mexican American culture, “but also to wage a domestic battle of stifling proportions.” Cisneros re-enters the “quiet war” zone defined by Esperanza in The House on Mango Street to chart the interstices and in-betweens of the borderlands, to remap symbolic maternal landscapes, and to open a protean space where la Llorona’s ghostly wail is replaced by “a voice all [her] own,” a “high, silver voice” that calls Cleófilas to a new spiritual birth (51). If Octavio Paz famously defined Mexicans as “the sons of la Malinche,” Cisneros surveys the possibilities for the daughters of la Llorona.

“Woman Hollering Creek” charts psychological, linguistic, and spiritual border crossings. The story appropriately begins on a literal threshold and a literal border. Don Serafin grants Juan Pedro Martinez Sanchez “permission” to take his daughter Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández “as his bride, across her father’s threshold, over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town en el otro lado — on the other side” (43). Cleófilas crosses these physical boundaries only within the confines of a patriarchal economy where she is permitted to exchange residence in her father’s house for residence in her husband’s, to exchange a town on one side of the border for a town much like it on the other. Trapped with her abusive husband in Seguín, Texas, Cleófilas thinks of Mexico:
"The town of gossips. The town of dust and despair. Which she has traded for this town of gossips. This town of dust, despair" (50).

To reach this residence north of the border, Juan Pedro drove Cleófilas over a bridge spanning La Gritona, the creek behind his house, another significant border or crossing point. "The natives only knew the arroyo one crossed on the way to San Antonio, and then once again on the way back, was called Woman Hollering, a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood" (46). As a newly-wed crossing the bridge, Cleófilas wondered whether "pain or rage" inspired the woman's "holler" but laughed, too, at the "funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after" (46). The "orchid of blood" from her first split lip replaces her bridal bouquet and girlish dreams of "happily ever after" (47, 43). Now she sits each day "by the creek's edge," with one child by her side and one in her womb, confined at this boundary line just beyond the back threshold of Juan Pedro’s house, because "there is no place to go" (43, 53, 51).

The creek’s mysterious name, and perhaps her own situation, reminds Cleófilas of another unhappy wife and mother confined to the banks of a river: "Is it La Llorona, the weeping woman? La Llorona, who drowned her own children. Perhaps La Llorona is the one they named the creek after, she thinks, remembering all the stories she learned as a child" (51). A folktale told for centuries in Mexico and the Southwest, "La Llorona" survives today in many forms. In one common version, a proud young girl marries above her station and is so enraged when her husband takes a mistress of his own class that she drowns their children in the river. Stricken by grief when she is unable to retrieve them, la Llorona dies on the river's edge. But to this day the villagers hear a voice in the wind and the water — "Aaaaiiiii ... my children. Where are my children?" — and see a wailing apparition in white walking up and down the riverbank after dark.8 The story of "La Llorona" often ends with a warning to children to stay indoors at night, for outside they may fall into her clutches. Cleófilas's neighbors tell her to stay away from the creek: "Don't go out there after dark, mi'jita. Stay near the house... You'll catch a fright wandering about in the dark, and then you'll see how right we were" (51).

Immersed in romance novels and the telenovelas, Cleófilas is initiated into a culture of weeping women, the tale of "La Llorona" retold in countless ways around her. She is imaginatively stirred by the telenovela María de Nadie without noticing the parallels to la Llorona's story in the "poor Argentine country girl who had the ill fortune of falling in love" with the son of her wealthy employer: "it was she who had to say No, no, we are not of the same class, and remind him it was not his
place nor hers to fall in love, while all the while her heart was breaking, can you imagine" (52). Cleófilas’s own life begins to resemble la Llorona’s, as she decodes and erases evidence of her husband’s infidelities:

A doubt. Slender as a hair. A washed cup set back on the shelf wrong-side-up. Her lipstick, and body talc, and hairbrush all arranged in the bathroom a different way. No. Her imagination. The house the same as always. Nothing. (50)

Looking for the “great love of [her] life” and to move up in the world, Cleófilas has crossed the border to find a life “like a telenovela, only now the episodes got sadder and sadder” (44, 45, 52). The names of her two widowed neighbors, Dolores and Soledad, suggest “pain” and “solitude”: the tears of la Llorona and of the Virgin Mary as Mater Dolorosa.19 Reconsidering the archetypal figures she calls “Our Mothers” in Borderlands, Anzaldúa exposes the “institutionalized oppression” in the Catholic Church’s use of la Virgen “to make us docile and enduring” and the exploitation of la Llorona “to make us a long-suffering people.”20 So Cleófilas, dreaming of romance and marriage, absorbs the message of fidelity and suffering from her favorite telenovela in Mexico, Tú o Nadie: “You or no one. Because to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow in the end” (45). She is marked doubly by the romances that enthrall her when her husband throws a book — “her book, a love story by Corín Telado” — across the room and raises “a hot welt across [her] cheek” (52).

La Llorona weeps, Anzaldúa observes, because there are no other options in her culture. “Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman’s feeble protest when she has no other recourse.”21 Octavio Paz notoriously interpreted all of the “Mexican representations of Maternity” as essentially “passive figures”: the Blessed Virgin signifying “pure receptivity”; Cortés’s Indian mistress la Malinche/la Chingada signifying the raped mother “who has suffered — metaphorically or actually — the corrosive and defaming accusation implicit in the verb [chingar] that gives her her name”; and la Llorona signifying “the ’long-suffering Mexican mother’ we celebrate on the tenth of May.”22 Paz did not explore the contradictions implicit in celebrating on Mother’s Day a mother who murders her own children, however. Nor did he release these figures from the immobilizing virgen/puta opposition that elevates la Llorona as a Mexican Mater Dolorosa while it debases her as a mujer mala akin to la Malinche. As Cordelia Candelaria has recently argued, “the Llorona legend begs for reconsideration and possible recuperation.” Candelaria’s poem “La Llorona: Portrait by the
River” opens, “La luz es todo: light is crucial.” The “light” in which this ghostly foremother is seen determines our perspective:

The splash of ripples  
As she bends to rinse tired feet  
Paint her flesh an instant shine  
Bright as tears. Or hope.23

Traditionally her reflection has been dark. A borderland figure who combines aspects of both the long-suffering virgen and the rebellious puta, she is most often depicted as a “wicked woman” and a “monstrous image of depravity.”24 Like la Malinche, she “roams the streets . . . wailing for her children and revenging herself on men”; both women have been known to entice men from their paths after dark, “calling to them in the familiar voice of their wives and sweethearts.” In some legends, la Llorona is explicitly identified with la Malinche, who murdered herself and her son by Cortés when he threatened to take the boy to Spain.25 In “Malinchista, A Myth Revised,” Alicia Gaspar de Alba locates la Llorona in the borderlands where nations cross and history is silent:

The woman shrieking along the littered bank of the Río Grande is not sorry. She is looking for revenge.  
Centuries she has been blamed for the murder of her child, the loss of her people, as if Tenochtitlan would not have fallen without her sin. History does not sing of the conquistador who prayed to a white god as he pulled two ripe hearts out of the land.26

Candelaria suggests that la Llorona survives because her “meanings are multiple” and culturally resonant.27 While her story appears in many forms and her origins remain subterranean and obscure, many commentators believe that she substantially predates la Malinche and colonial history. Richard Dorson discovers la Llorona in “an Aztec goddess who sacrificed babies and disappeared shrieking into lakes or rivers.” She appears sometimes as the goddesses Cihua-pipiltlin, who died in childbirth and then returned to haunt the living, more often as Cihuacóhuatl, who roamed the night “dressed in white with a cradle on her shoulders, wailing for her lost child.”28 In Borderlands/La Frontera, Anzaldúa resurrects Cihuacoatl/la Llorona as “Snake Woman . . . Daughter of the Night, traveling the dark terrains of the unknown searching for the lost parts of herself.”29
In “My Black Angelos,” Anzaldúa explores the lost terrains of her foremothers Cihuacoatl and la Llorona, taking on the power and darkness of the spirit who whimpers softly at her door, and whose “grito splinters the night.” The poet’s black Angel “turns upwind tracking” her, sensing “fear” and the “stink of carrion,” their dark kinship. First “putting words” in the poet’s head, then crawling into her very spine, “shining under my skin in the dark/whirling my bones twirling/till they’re hollow reeds,” the Muse crosses the threshold of her “door,” erases the boundaries between self and other, and finally between the living and the dead: “We sweep through the streets/con el viento corremos/we roam with the souls of the dead.”

Like Anzaldúa’s speaker, Cisneros’s Cleófilas also feels the urgent tug of personal connection with la Llorona. She hears “La Llorona calling to her. She is sure of it” (51). The stream that is “only a muddy puddle in the summer” rushes now that it is spring — “because of the rains, a good-size alive thing, a thing with a voice all its own, all day and all night calling in its high, silver voice” (51). The “alive thing” does not call Cleófilas to death, however, but to a springlike renewal. As Cisneros renews la Llorona’s story and rewrites her fate, she releases her to leave her unfaithful and abusive husband and to take her children away with her — to choose life instead of death and to cross the river instead of remaining eternally trapped on its banks.

She releases la Llorona from her tears. “I’d like to think that [la Llorona] was crying for her lost children, los Chicanos/mexicanos,” writes Anzaldúa. Cisneros’s Llorona cries for the lost women, mourning the victims and casualties of male violence, mourning Cleófilas. As the men laugh outside the kitchen window, Cleófilas washes dishes and thinks of Maximiliano from across the road, “who was said to have killed his wife in an ice-house brawl when she came at him with a mop” (51), and of the mute and nameless women whose stories flood the newspapers:

Was Cleófilas just exaggerating as her husband always said? It seemed the newspapers were full of such stories. This woman found on the side of the interstate. This one pushed from a moving car. This one’s cadaver, this one unconscious, this one beaten blue. Her ex-husband, her husband, her lover, her father, her brother, her uncle, her friend, her co-worker. Always. The same grisly news in the pages of the dailies. She dunked a glass under the soapy water for a moment — shivered. (52)

If her husband “always” discredits Cleófilas’s fears, nevertheless the “grisly news” is “always” the same. Her own bruises bear mute witness
to the reality of "such stories" even if her husband dismisses her recital of the facts as "just exaggerating."

Beneath the talk at home and in the icehouse a silent subtext struggles for expression. Cleófilas is mute in the face of her husband's violence; "speechless, motionless, numb," the first time and each time thereafter, "she could think of nothing to say, said nothing" (48). She is also voiceless with the men in the icehouse, where she "sits mute beside their conversation . . . and finally becomes good at predicting where the talk will lead" (48). Their talk will lead nowhere, for the discourse of the men is strangled as well:

They want to tell each other what they want to tell themselves. But what is bumping like a helium balloon at the ceiling of the brain never finds its way out. It bubbles and rises, it gurgles in the throat, it rolls across the surface of the tongue, and erupts from the lips — a belch. (48)

Their long evenings will end in tears "if they are lucky." If they are not lucky, violence will be their only mode of expression, as their "fists try to speak" (48). In her own home Cleófilas suffers both modes of strangled male utterance. After every beating, she silently "stroked the dark curls of the man who wept and would weep like a child, his tears of repentance and shame" (48).

While Juan Pedro stays out late, Cleófilas lies alone in their bed "listening to the hollow roar of the interstate, a distant dog barking, the pecan trees rustling like ladies in stiff petticoats — shh-shh-shh, shh-shh-shh — soothing her to sleep" (44). The sounds of nature and distant travel and the "silver voice" of la Llorona in the creek counterpoint the "whispering" and "murmur of talk" in Seguín, where there is "no more privacy" than there was in the town of her birth (50). Communication among the women on both sides of the border revolves around the telenovelas and around men. Her Texan neighbors Soledad and Dolores might have known more about the etymology of "Woman Hollering Creek," Cleófilas guesses, but "they were too busy remembering the men who had left through either choice or circumstance and would never come back" (47). Gossip, in this town as in the other, is the provenance not just of women but of men as well. In Mexico she locates it in the town center and on the church steps; in Texas at the icehouse, a gathering place for the men (50). While some anthropologists suggest that gossip functions as "an important source of social power for women," others have concluded that "being under constant verbal surveillance restricts the behavior of women and helps keep them in their place."32 Cleófilas fears her husband, but she

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also fears the “whispering” and “murmur of talk” in both towns, the social “disgrace” that would attend her return to her father’s house. “What would the neighbors say?” (50).

If town gossip and her husband’s strictures keep her in her place, Cleófilas mobilizes another discourse of power to break free from them: “Because the doctor has said so” (53). Deploying the American doctor’s voice to counter her husband’s voice, she secures permission to cross the arroyo and journey to San Antonio for the health of her unborn child and for her own safety. “Because she is going to make sure the baby is not turned around backward this time to split her down the center” (53). In return, she agrees to maintain silence, assuring her husband: “No, she won’t mention it. She promises. If the doctor asks she can say she fell down the front steps or slipped when she was in the backyard, slipped out back, she could tell him that” (53). She keeps her promise, but la Llorona speaks through her: Cleófilas’s torrent of tears and the “black-and-blue marks all over” her body tell the story she still has no voice for. “This lady doesn’t even speak English,” says Graciela to Felice on the phone as they plan Cleófilas’s escape. “She hasn’t been allowed to call home or write or nothing” (54).

“Another one of those brides from across the border,” Graciela remarks (54). Now crossing in reverse her husband’s threshold, the bridge over Woman Hollering Creek, the U.S./Mexico border, and her father’s threshold, Cleófilas has “slipped out back” in another sense, slipping out while her husband is still at work. Although she remains within the patriarchal economy of exchange in returning from husband to father, she has also encountered a woman “like no woman she’d ever met” (56). Felice drives her to San Antonio in a pickup that is “hers,” that “she herself had chosen,” that “she herself was paying for” (55). Cleófilas wonders “what kind of talk” this is “coming from a woman” when Felice explains, “I used to have a Pontiac Sunbird. But those cars are for viejas. Pussy cars. Now this here is a real car” (54). And she is even more amazed by the “yell as loud as any mariachi” that Felice lets rip as they cross Woman Hollering Creek (55). When Cleófilas had asked about la Gritona, “no one could say whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain” (46). Now through Felice this binary opposition is undone; la Llorona/la Gritona begins to laugh.33 “Who would’ve thought?” Cleófilas wonders back in Mexico. “Who would’ve? Pain or rage, perhaps, but not a hoot like the one Felice had just let go. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, Felice had said” (56).

When the motherless Cleófilas returns, by way of two women — or comadres,34 to her father and brothers, maternal bonds crisscross with paternal bonds. It is through maternity that she realizes the
strength of the literal bond between parent and child, as opposed to the symbolic bond conferred by marriage. She remembers her father’s words — “I am your father, I will never abandon you” (43) — only “as a mother,” with her son beside her and her unborn child inside her:

Only now as a mother did she remember. Now, when she and Juan Pedrito sat by the creek’s edge. How when a man and a woman love each other, sometimes that love sours. But a parent’s love for a child, a child’s for its parents, is another thing entirely. (43)

Felice and Graciela speculate that Cleófilas has been named after “one of those Mexican saints . . . a martyr or something” (54). Her son, Juan Pedrito, has been named after his father. But she may pass on new knowledge and new names to her next child, for as Graciela and Felice joke, “When her kid’s born she’ll have to name her after us, right?” (55). Graciela’s sonogram of the child in utero is on more than one level a sounding of the invisible, a cloudy and fluid image of a form still forming, a picture of the future. The nationality, language, appearance, and even the sex of the baby is indeterminate, as the doctor — or perhaps Cleófilas herself — refers to “he,” and Graciela later — perhaps on the basis of the sonogram — refers to “her” (53, 55). Occupying what Julia Kristeva lyrically evokes as a realm before language, a realm without “borders, separations,” the “formless unnameable embryo” curled within the body of the mother transcends boundaries and definitions: “FLASH — instant of time or of dream without time; inordinately swollen atoms of a bond, a vision, a shiver . . . photos of what is not yet visible and that language necessarily skims from afar, allusively.”

Cleófilas’s new child embodies an emerging “hybrid” mestiza language and consciousness, as Graciela, Felice, Cleófilas, and the child yet to be born, yet to be named cross over in the polyglot interzone of the borderlands. When Cleófilas tells the story of Felice to her father and brothers, she enacts this crossing in a moment of laughter where she interchanges identities to become Felice, la Llorona, and the “silver voice” of the creek, thereby giving birth to her own felicity (Felice, felicidad) and grace (Graciela, gracia): “Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn’t Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (56).

The creek itself contains a linguistic crossing, known both as Woman Hollering and as La Gritona. When Cleófilas wants to know more about the name, the natives can only speculate that the Indians might know: “Pues, allá de los indios, quién sabe — who knows” (46). The languages mark shifting national boundaries: before the institution, in
the 1840s, of the border that Cleófilas crosses twice, Texas was part of Mexico; before the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Mexico was Indian. Indeed Mexican independence from Spain was launched with a revolutionary "cry" or grito: Hidalgo y Castillo’s *Grito de Dolores* in 1810. And this town north of the border, once south of the border, was named after a creek before 1838, when it was renamed Seguín in honor of the *tejano* Juan Seguín, who sided with the Americans over the annexation of his Mexican homeland Texas. The “townspeople shrugged” at Cleófilas’s questions, “because it was of no concern to their lives how this trickle of water received its curious name” (46). Yet it is through the hidden strata of meaning in the creek that Cleófilas recollects and claims her own life, history, identity, and voice.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa insists on the importance to the mestiza of recuperating history and prehistory, of establishing a multitongued linguistic identity, “twin skin” to ethnic identity: “I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue — my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.” Cisneros invokes the centuries-old tradition of female silence, subservience, and suffering underwritten by Mexican culture and the Catholic Church in the names of Cleófilas’s neighbors, both aspects of the Virgin celebrated widely in Mexico: *la Virgen de la Soledad* (“Virgin of the Lonely”) and *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores* (*Mater Dolorosa*, “Our Lady of Sorrows”). As Cleófilas and her driver hurtle over the bridge spanning Woman Hollering Creek, Felice laughs at the ubiquity of the Blessed Virgin, and the singularity of the mysterious Gritona: “Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she’s the Virgin” (55). In this androcentric culture of weeping women, where Soledad and Dolores devote themselves to the memories of their lost men, Cleófilas is bound to “this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this master, this husband till kingdom come” (49). The language rewrites the “Our Father” — “Thy kingdom come: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” — and the rigid ecclesiastical hierarchy used to subjugate women and sanction male dominance. “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord,” instructed Saint Paul. “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church. . . . Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.” On earth as defined by this heaven, it is the will of Cleófilas’s husband, of Maximiliano from across the road, of the men in the icehouse and the newspapers that will be done.
Fleeing Juan Pedro, named for John and Peter, the two Apostles associated with the patriarchal foundations of the Word and the Church, Cleófilas returns to her father, Don Serafín, whose name derives from both “serpent” and “seraphim,” the choir of angels most ardently devoted to the divine. When she married, “already did he divine the morning his daughter would . . . dream of returning” (43). His parting words to Cleófilas, which she repeats with growing certainty, evoke a merciful God who will not abandon her in her distress. At first her memory of Don Serafín’s promise is oddly tentative:

He had said, after all, in the hubbub of parting: I am your father, I will never abandon you. He had said that, hadn’t he, when he hugged and then let her go. But at the moment Cleófilas was busy looking for Chela, her maid of honor, to fulfill their bouquet conspiracy. She would not remember her father’s parting words until later. I am your father, I will never abandon you. (43)

Cleófilas’s initial uncertainty might suggest that the words are not her father’s, but her gradual sense of conviction, the firmness of the italics, could also suggest her increasing confidence in her own scriptural interpretation.

Sensing what “drives a woman to the darkness under the trees” where la Llorona wails for her forsaken children (51), Cleófilas meditates on the bond between parent and child and the fate of her unborn infant. Her father’s promise echoes lines from a Catholic hymn: “Could the Lord ever leave you? Could the Lord forget his love? Though a mother forsake her child, he will not abandon you.” Freeing herself from the scriptural interpretations that would designate Juan Pedro “this father . . . this husband till kingdom come,” Cleófilas undergoes a spiritual transformation from sorrow to grace, turning from the aptly named Soledad and Dolores to accept the help of Graciela and Felice.

Back home with her children, father, and brothers, Cleófilas overcomes the “tradition of silence” and claims her right to speak in tongues. Her gurgling laughter bears what Julia Kristeva terms “the imprint of an archaic moment.” If place names function as “a replacement for what the speaker perceives as an archaic mother,” then Cleófilas summons the mother tongue before or behind “Woman Hollering,” “La Gritona,” and the creek’s hidden Indian name, a maternal semiotic chora preceding the paternal symbolic order. Felice spoke a “Spanish pocked with English” with her passenger, and Cleófilas “doesn’t even speak English” (55, 54), but their crossing has released a lost mother tongue “like water,” suggesting both the words from the
Catholic Pentecost vigil — "He who believes in Me, from within him there shall flow rivers of living water"\textsuperscript{48} and the ancient Aztec "goddess of running water, springs, and streams," Chalchiuhtlicue, who was invoked by her worshipers for the "protection of newborn children."\textsuperscript{49}

Fluid and multiple, Cleófilas herself has become "woman hollering creek."\textsuperscript{50}

Cleófilas's crossing through the borderland territory of the new mestiza is complex. As Anzaldúa writes, "Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a \textit{travesía}, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again."\textsuperscript{51} The shifting borders in "Woman Hollering Creek" are geographical, national, political, historical. They are also gendered — in the social divisions between men and women; biological — in the newborn's passage from its mother's body; psychological and spiritual — in Cleófilas's "step forward" into a new mestiza consciousness and voice; linguistic — in the crossing of languages, the recovery of lost tongues, and of new etymologies and definitions for the river and the legendary mother who haunts its banks: "now in springtime, because of the rains, a good-size alive thing, a thing with a voice all its own, all day and all night calling in its high, silver voice. Is it La Llorona, the weeping woman?" (51).

Through successive dislocations, Cleófilas relocates herself and her posterity, leaving behind a dusty town "built so that you have to depend on husbands," reclaiming herself in the fluid liminal space of this "trickle of water" with its "curious name," this "muddy puddle" growing in strength to become a musical torrent (50–51, 46, 51). If she made her first passage across the Rio Grande in thrall to romantic dreams, she frees herself from this ethos of feminine submission in her passage back. The creek with its multiple names and meanings serves as a natural resource for Cleófilas's new self-expression and emerging identity. In her "long ribbon of laughter, like water," la Llorona's ghostly \textit{l}l\textit{l}\textit{a}nto, or tearful lament, becomes a \textit{gri}to or shout, a Tarzan whoop of joyous strength and independence.\textsuperscript{52}

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Notes

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3. See “Ghosts and Voices” and “Notes to a Young(er) Writer,” The Americas Review, 72, 76.


9. Anzaldúa, 84.
11. Anzaldúa, 55.
12. Anzaldúa, 82.
16. “I have begun my own quiet war,” announces Esperanza, “Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate.” Cisneros, The House on Mango Street, 89.


33. Cisneros's revision of la Llorona suggests parallels to Hélène Cixous's revision of Medusa: women's history as a history of silences, a language written in mother's milk, and above all a liberation from false polarities within male discourse. "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing." "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in New French Feminisms: An Anthology, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 255.

34. The term comadre, or, literally translated, "co-mother," traditionally refers to the woman a mother has chosen as godmother for her child. Today it is also used simply as a term of respect and affection for a female friend. Graciela calls Felice comadre at the end of their phone call (55).

35. My research has not yielded a saint or martyr named Cleófilas, but Saint Felicitas is famous as one of the relatively few saints and martyrs who were not virgins; she faced martyrdom as an expectant mother. This cross of names and saints prefigures the crossing of Cleófilas and Felice in the last lines of the story. See Rev. Hugo H. Hoever, ed., Saint Joseph Daily Missal (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1957), 816.

36. Given the fluidity of the embryo's boundaries, and the fluid interchange between the women in the border zone, it is interesting to note that José Limón identifies "fluid boundaries" as the central characteristic of the legends of la Llorona. Not only are the contours of the narrative fluid (the tale survives in countless variants), but the content is as well:

For a female sensibility of fluid boundaries is precisely what is articulated in La Llorona’s initial denial of her children through water; her fluid crying of tears for them and finally her implied hope of their restoration from the water-of-birth even as she herself becomes fluidity itself walking at the boundaries of the water in her flowing gown.

"La Llorona, the Third Legend of Greater Mexico," 418.


38. Juan Seguín straddles the border in his divided loyalties and also in the mixed treatment he was accorded by Texan Anglo-Americans, who drove him out of San Antonio into Mexico in 1842. He thereafter occupied an uneasy political position between the United States and Mexico, living in one and then the other country. He died in Mexico in 1890; in 1974 he was reburied in Seguín (formerly Walnut Creek), Texas. See Genaro M. Padilla, My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), esp. 64–72.


42. Ephesians 5:22–24.

43. See John 1:1 ("In the beginning as the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God") and Matthew 17:18 ("thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church"). Much controversy surrounds the question of apostolic authority and the silencing of women in the early Christian community. See ch. 5, "Taming a Wild Tongue," in Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera; ch. 10 and ch. 11 in Margaret Brackenbury Crook, Women and Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); ch. 3 in Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1979, 1981); and ch. 8 in Rosemary Radford Ruether, Readings Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

44. See Jori Bas i Vidal, Diccionario de los Nombres de Persona (Barcelona: Editorial de Vecchi, S.A., 1988), 297.

45. See Dan Schutte, "Though the Mountains May Fall," Seasonal Missalette (June 6, 1993), 8(8):58. This section of the hymn adapts Isaiah 49:15.

46. This spiritual transformation parallels the healing process for battered women that Susan Brooks Thistlewaite describes in "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (New York: Harper and Row, 1989). Thistlewaite emphasizes the importance for battered women of taking control of biblical texts — through feminist scriptural reinterpretation, through a liberation theology that stresses Jesus’s protection of the powerless and care for women, and through a recognition of the active role women played in discipleship, apostolic witness, and leadership in the early Catholic Church.

47. See Kristeva, "Place Names," esp. 283, 291, 276, 281.


Chalchiuhtlicue among the names and aspects of her revised *Virgen de Guadalupe* in “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” (*Woman Hollering Creek*, 128).

50. Margaret Homans argues that “the reproduction of mothering will also be the reproduction of a presymbolic communicativeness, a literal language,” and that the “lost relation to the mother” might possibly be found in the “nonsymbolic figure” of a “new child.” Positing childbirth itself as a “structure of literalization,” Homans identifies moments of passage from the figurative to the literal in literary texts as embodying a specifically female linguistic practice “at the heart of gender difference in language.” The conclusion of “Woman Hollering Creek” would seem to exemplify one such moment. See ch. 1, “Representation, Reproduction, and Women’s Place in Language,” in Homans’s *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), esp. 25, 26, 29–30.

51. Anzaldúa, 48.

52. In an interview Cisneros emphasizes the crossing of cultures in la Llorona’s new “holler”:

Yes, this other woman — the Chicana woman — could understand the myth in a new way. She could see it as a grito, not a llanto. And all of a sudden, that woman who came with all of her Mexican assumptions learned something. The Chicana woman showed her a new way of looking at a Mexican myth. And it took someone who was a little bit outside the culture to see the myth in a new way.