Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek”: Narrative as Rhetoric and as Cultural Practice

Note: This essay emerged out of my efforts to think about the relations among Sandra Cisneros’s moving story, “Woman Hollering Creek,” the kind of rhetorical analysis I have done in the past, and the kind of cultural criticism suggested by de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life. I have adopted the dialogue form in order to avoid a false synthesis of the two approaches and to convey instead their sometimes converging, sometimes diverging, sometimes complementary perspectives. Although Cisneros is not an explicit speaker in this dialogue, I have assumed that “Woman Hollering Creek” is the most important presence: the speakers, RT (for “rhetorical theorist”) and MC (for “Michel de Certeau”), should be judged according to how well they are responsible and responsive to the story.

The positions and insights attributed to MC are frequently based on my interpretations of and extrapolations from The Practice of Everyday Life and so should not be read as the unmediated views of de Certeau himself. RT’s positions and insights are built on my earlier work, but RT should not be read as a totally reliable spokesperson for the implied author of this dialogue—if s/he could, there would be no point to the dialogue.

RT: Suppose we begin by trying to describe each other’s interests and what we find attractive and limiting in them. If that’s OK, I’ll go first. (MC nods).

The Practice of Everyday Life valuably theorizes the condition of being on the margins of culture without assuming that to be marginal is to be powerless. Indeed, your emphasis on the multiple ways in which those on the margins manage to create room for maneuver within dominant culture is a significant contribution to cultural theory. In identifying this room for maneuver, you develop the key distinction between “strategies” and “tactics.” You define a strategy as a readily identified system of operations in which the borders between the strategy and that which it operates upon are clear and distinct. Scientific rationality, for example, is a strategy par excellence.

James Phelan, Professor and Chair of English at The Ohio State University, is the editor of Narrative.
this rationality prescribes a set of rules and procedures—the so-called scientific method—by which to understand a "nature" distinct from those rules and procedures. You define a tactic, by contrast, as a kind of parasitic operation, one in which an individual sends some existing larger system to his or her advantage without the bending itself becoming a more abstract rule or effecting a permanent change in the system.

You point out that the practice of everyday life offers many opportunities for tactical maneuver: "talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc." (25). Those on the margins of culture often become expert tacticians. What you and others in France call la perruque is a tactic par excellence: "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer" (25); it includes things as simple as "a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room" (25).

There's lots more of course, but let me stop there and ask whether you recognize your book in this description of it.

MC: I hope I can do as well with a description of your interests. The rhetorical theorist wants to analyze how authors communicate to readers through texts, with each term in that formulation requiring explication. "Authors" are both historical beings and the causes readers infer for the effects of texts. "Texts" are both words on the page and the literary and cultural conventions—and thus, intertexts—that those words invoke. "Readers" are real people and hypothetical audiences implied by texts. Furthermore, the communication that goes on involves the reader's intellect, emotions, psyche, and ethics. The rhetorical theorist can start an analysis with the author, the reader, or the text, but the starting point will necessarily lead to some consideration of the other variables.

Shall we move on and discuss the limits of our approaches?

RT: Sure, but first a caveat. The limits I see in your approach are limits from my perspective, a function of what I want to know, rather than fundamental flaws in your analysis. As a theorist of culture rather than of literature, you most immediately and clearly offer critics some new ways of thematizing. In the case of "Woman Hollering Creek," I'd imagine that such thematizing would highlight the story's three main tactical maneuvers: (1) Cleófilas's convincing her husband that she needs to see the doctor; (2) Graciela's calling Felice from the doctor's office to arrange for Cleófilas's ride out of Seguín, while Cleófilas's husband waits in the next room; (3) above all, Felice's reinterpretating the name, "Woman Hollering Creek," to mean not the weeping and wailing of La Llorona but the whooping and laughing of an independent woman. Developing such an interpretation would involve offering detailed accounts of these maneuvers, as well as considering the significance of their sequence in the final three segments of the narrative. With some additional work, the interpretation might well claim that "Woman Hollering Creek," is a literary demonstration of your general insights into the nature and value of tactics.

I find such an interpretation to be helpful in the way that most thematic readings of narrative are: it provides a translation of the detailed language and action of the narrative into some readily intelligible broader concepts, allowing us to take in the
whole narrative in one fell swoop. But such an interpretation is also limited in the way that most thematic readings of narrative are: it does not account very precisely for the multiple parts of the story or the details of Cisneros’s technique, and it does not address itself to the experiential quality of reading the story.

**MC:** I hope that, before we are finished, I can complicate your view of what I might offer literary critics, but let me follow the protocol and articulate my sense of your limits.

You make too sharp a distinction between literary theory (which you claim as your interest) and cultural theory (which you designate as my interest) and so your helpful attention to technique leads to overly narrow conclusions about effect and literary form. By “overly narrow,” I don’t mean “wrong” but rather “limited.” I think you’re operating with a view of literature that is too self-contained, too disconnected from culture and its workings. Storytelling is a practice of everyday life; it occurs in culture and it has designs on culture. Any critical practice should talk about those designs.

**RT:** Thanks for your candor—I guess. Rather than trying to correct each other, I suggest that we turn to a more detailed discussion of “Woman Hollering Creek” and explore the powers and limits of each approach. It’s probably helpful to begin with an overview of Cisneros’s *fabula* and of her narration.

Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández marries Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez and crosses the border with him from Mexico to Seguin, Texas. Isolated in the new culture, Cleófilas soon has to endure beatings from her husband and the likelihood of his infidelity. She has few cultural resources to draw on other than her memory of her father’s love and his promise that he would never abandon her. Unexpectedly aided by two sympathetic Chicanas, Graciela and Felice, who want to help her escape her abusive husband, Cleófilas, pregnant with her second child, begins her journey back across the border. The story ends, however, not with her return but with a moment during her escape. Cleófilas is initially amazed by everything about Felice, especially by Felice’s “hollering like Tarzan” as they cross the creek called “La Gritona.” The amazement leads to the moment described in the story’s concluding sentences: “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).

To tell this story, Cisneros uses an undramatized, largely effaced narrator and a sequence of fourteen discrete narrative sections. The narrator displays no explicit awareness of the interrelation among the sections; there are no transitional devices and no explicit cross-references between them. This technique requires Cisneros’s audience to become active collaborators in constructing the narrative. The fourteen narrative sections are like different pieces of a mosaic whose overall shape and design we need to deduce. Our best strategy is to build up from the numerous local inferences Cisneros’s technique guides us to as we read each of the fourteen sections.

Are these initial observations acceptable?

**MC:** They are fine, but it’s also important to identify at the outset the cultural narratives “Woman Hollering Creek” is situating itself in relation to. It’s clearly a story of
border crossing, and in 1991 such a story by a Chicana writer will have Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* as an intertext. That is, while “Woman Hollering Creek” is not Anzaldúa’s book rendered as allegory, Anzaldúa’s discussion of the borders of identity and of mestiza consciousness is relevant to the story. As Cleófilas crosses the border from Mexico to Texas and then back again to Mexico, her primary identity changes from daughter to wife and back again to daughter but the ending suggests that her return to daughter is a return with a difference.

More specifically, “Woman Hollering Creek” sets up Cleófilas’s story against the backdrop of the *telenovelas* in Mexico, commercialized tales of romance and passion used to sell cosmetics and clothes. These *telenovelas* shape Cleófilas’s ideas—and those of the other Mexican women in the story—about love, marriage, and consumerism. The grim reality of Cleófilas’s story functions as an anti-*telenovela*, an exposure of their dangerous ideological messages about the value of suffering for love and their association of romance with certain clothes, cosmetics, and other fashions. In this way, Cisneros fights fictions of the mass media with her own, high cultural narrative.

“Woman Hollering Creek” is also a feminist coming to consciousness narrative. Graciela, Felice, La Gritona, and of course Cleófilas herself all contribute to Cleófilas’s sudden recognition that there is a life for women beyond the roles of daughter and wife. While this recognition of course does not alter the material conditions of her life, it does alter her understanding of what is possible for women.

Finally, the story works with the myth of “La Llorona,” the maternal figure who is weeping for her lost children, and any analysis should address how Cisneros rewrites the myth.

Agreed?

**RT:** Not entirely. I acknowledge the analogies between the story and the larger cultural narratives, but I’m worried that assimilating it into them will erase its particularity, will turn it into an allegory. But let’s keep going with our more specific concerns. What elements of the story would you like to focus on?

**MC:** Time, voice, the role of reading, the idea of borders. What elements are of most concern to you?

**RT:** Time and voice are of great interest to me, as is the progression as a whole. OK if I begin with the story’s treatment of time?

*When MC nods, RT reads:*

The day Don Serafín gave Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez 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—already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning to chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man’s complaints.
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 words until later: I am your father, I will never abandon you.

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.

This is what Cleófilas thought evenings when Juan Pedro did not come home, and she lay on her side of the 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. (43–44)

What arrests my attention here is the way this opening moves across four different temporal moments. **Time 1 and Time 2:** Cisneros begins with what appears to be a narrative summary of the thoughts of Cleófilas’s father, apparently focalized through him: “The day Don Serafín gave Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez permission to take his daughter Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández as his bride . . . already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning . . .” (43). In reading the first half of the sentence, we infer that the present time of the narrative is Cleófilas’s wedding day, but, by the second half we need to revise the inference and re-establish narrative present as the morning Cleófilas would look to return home.

**Time 3:** As the narration continues, so do our revisions. First, we learn that Don Serafín’s divination of the future is actually part of Cleófilas’s memory—the focalization, in other words, is through Cleófilas. Furthermore, since the narrator twice uses the adverb “now,” we infer that narrative present is the moment of memory: “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 for a parent’s is another thing entirely” (43).

**Time 4:** Yet this revision is not our last. As the narration continues, the focalization shifts from Cleófilas to the narrator, who offers a summary: “This is what Cleófilas thought evenings . . . when Juan Pedro did not come home, and she lay on her side of the bed, listening to the 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 my italics). The shift in focalization is accompanied by another shift in the present time of the narrative: not when Cleófilas is by the creek but when she is in her bed. Furthermore, when we attend to evenings, we need to make further inferences. Cleófilas’s memory of her father’s promise is not a singular event occurring on a particular morning or during a particular outing to the creek but something that she experiences over and over again.

**MC:** Your analysis so far supports one general point about Cisneros’s tactical de-
ployment of time. Much of the story plays off traditional, culturally dominant notions of time and its representation in narrative. In the Western tradition, we assume that although narratives may explore the psychological experience of time, they will also at least imply some sense of “real time”—the time we measure with clocks and calendars, the time that moves forward in a straight line. My discussion of memory and story in *The Practice of Everyday Life* takes this conception of time for granted. “Woman Hollering Creek,” however, adopts the tactic of representing Cleófilas’s psychological experience of time without providing any clear backdrop of linear time. It is impossible, for example, to determine just how long Cleófilas lives in Seguín and impossible to place each of the story’s fourteen sections on a clear time line.

In adopting this tactic, Cisneros is implicitly claiming that the standard temporal strategies of narrative are not adequate for the story she has to tell. In order to do justice to Cleófilas’s experience, time in this narrative needs to move in imperfect circles—or even to stand still. In representing time that way, Cisneros is able to show that, for Cleófilas, past and present intermingle and that any one moment is layered with other, usually similar, occasionally contrasting moments. Nothing like this would ever happen in a telenovela.

**RT:** OK. So far our discussions of time seem to complement each other pretty well. Adding other details of section one to its treatment of time, I see these effects:

(1) The shifts in the opening sentence lead us to place a significant emphasis on Cleófilas’s wedding day and her father’s promise. Indeed, as a result of that emphasis, we easily identify the main instability in the present time of the narrative—Cleófilas’s unhappiness with her husband—and see it in a clear relation to her past.

(2) We also recognize her “dream of returning” as the alternative to her present situation in which her love has soured, even as that dream means returning to “chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man’s complaints” (43).

(3) We recognize that both present and past highlight Cleófilas’s subordinate position as woman: her father “gives permission” to another man to marry her—and more generally, prior to her marriage, she is surrounded by the men of the family; in the present she is mistreated by her husband who “does not come home” (44).

(4) Once we see that Cleófilas’s memory of her father’s promise is a recurring one, we also can infer that the present time of the narrative is considerably after her marriage has gone sour: it has been sufficiently long for the unpleasant prospect of returning home to become a “dream.” This passage of time also makes it unlikely that the dream will come true.

(5) More generally, after we experience the sequence of corrections to our hypotheses about the temporal perspective, we infer how Cleófilas experiences time. As you say, for her, time is layered so that any one moment is likely to contain past moments. Thus, for her, time involves repetition: what happens once may—indeed, very likely will—happen again.

(6) As a result of this whole set of inferences, we immediately sympathize with Cleófilas and desire some amelioration of her situation.

**MC:** I’d just add that the layering of time complicates the sense of space. Although
Cleófilas has physically moved from Mexico to Texas, she hasn’t been able to relocate herself psychologically. Borders are already getting blurred.

What do you see happening with time later in the story?

RT: In sections two through eleven, Cisneros continues to develop the nonlinear temporality, as she also deepens the gloomy portrait of Cleófilas’s existence. More than once, she presents what initially appears to be a singular event and reveals it to be part of a repetitive pattern. Consider, for example, the last two sentences of section five, a section that begins as a description of the “first time” Juan Pedro beats Cleófilas: “She could think of nothing to say, said nothing. Just stroked the dark curls of the man who wept and would weep like a child, his tears of repentance and shame, this time and each” (48 my emphasis). This technique also suggests that Cleófilas experiences the event largely the same way every time. The effect is subtle but clear: our sense of Cleófilas’s pain intensifies.

Another technique that Cisneros employs in sections two through eleven to convey the nonlinear sense of time is switching between the past tense and present tense for the narration of action in the present time of the story. As a result, we have difficulty determining whether the present time of the story ever advances past the point we reach at the end of section one. As you said before, it is not possible to locate precisely each of the first eleven sections on a clear time line. The effect is to make us feel lost inside the painful cycles of Cleófilas’s life.

MC: You are providing useful specifics. What do you have to say about the last three sections?

RT: There Cisneros shifts from representing the cyclic time of seemingly endless repetition to representing the forward march of linear time. Section twelve represents Cleófilas’s talking her husband into letting her go to the doctor; section thirteen presents Graciela’s half of the phone conversation with Felice during that visit; and section fourteen narrates Cleófilas’s ride with Felice that was arranged during that phone call. Cisneros’s shift highlights the climactic nature of the final paragraph, Cleófilas’s achievement of voice: “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). Cleófilas’s life, it seems, has finally escaped the repetitive cycles in which present, past, and future are one indistinguishable, depressing whole.

Yet, this sense of climax is tempered by another variation, a sudden break in the chronological flow. Just before the climactic revelation, Cisneros moves the perspective into the future: “Can you imagine, when we crossed the arroyo, she started yelling like a crazy, she [Cleófilas] would later say to her father and brothers” (56 my emphasis). This break not only reveals the important information that Cleófilas does, in fact, arrive home but it also reminds us that Cleófilas’s epiphany is only one moment not the beginning of a happily-ever-after life. After this moment, she still faces her life with “chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man’s complaints” (43).

MC: Again, these specifics are fine. But what is the larger significance of this way of
handling time? When Cisneros shifts the narrative back to a more common Western conception of time, she may at first seem to be moving back to a more standard narrative form. Forward movement of time is accompanied by forward progress of the heroine. Yet the treatment is more complicated than that. As you say, despite the moment of epiphany, Cleófilas ends where she began. In a sense, she’s traveled in one large circle, both temporally and spatially. Again we should observe the contrast between “Woman Hollering Creek” and the telenovela where change is a constant. In this way also Cisneros writes an anti-telenovela.

RT: OK. Want to begin with voice?

MC: In “Woman Hollering Creek,” Cisneros invites us to thematize voice through her choice of title and through her frequent reliance upon the voices of characters to carry the story. There are several important voices besides that of the narrator: those of Cleófilas, her father, her husband, the men at the ice house, the women who watch the telenovelas, Trini the laundromat attendant, Graciela, and Felice. The ending makes it clear that Cisneros is as concerned with “the voice of the body” as with the voice of the intellect. But orality here is actually subordinated to writing, and nowhere more so than in the ending where Cleófilas’s achievement of voice is not quoted but described: “It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water.” Cisneros has carefully orchestrated the voices for her anti-telenovela, calling attention in the end to her own writerly function. She announces the story as high art.

RT: Well, perhaps. It won’t surprise you to hear me say that I’d rather work up to such conclusions through more specific analyses. Here are some thoughts on the men’s voices. Cisneros marks a significant difference between Cleófilas’s father, on the one side, and her husband and the men at the ice house on the other. Her father speaks only once, but, as we’ve seen, he speaks with a voice of parental love that Cleófilas can later recall despite her failure to pay attention on her wedding day: “I am your father, I will never abandon you” (43).

Juan Pedro’s voice is also not prominent in the story; indeed, his longest unmediated speech occurs about halfway through the story in a passage that moves from indirect to direct discourse. Like the voice of Cleófilas’s father, the voice of Juan Pedro is heard within one of her meditations. The indirect discourse works to allow Cisneros both to represent the different qualities of the two voices and to show how Cleófilas has, if not internalized both voices, at least kept them playing inside her head. Cleófilas has to wonder why she loves her husband, the narrator tells us, when he “says he hates this shitty house and is going out where he won’t be bothered with the baby’s howling and her suspicious questions, and her requests to fix this and this because if she had any brains in her head she’d realize he’s been up before the rooster earning his living to pay for the food in his belly and the roof over her head and would have to wake up again early the next day, so why can’t you just leave me in peace, woman?” (49). We easily infer both the contrast between Juan Pedro’s harsh, complaining voice and Don Serafín’s loving one and Cisneros’s privileging of
the father’s voice. While Cleófilas “has to . . . wonder a little” why she loves her husband, we recognize that he does not deserve her love.

Cisneros gives other evidence of the values associated with Juan Pedro’s voice by associating him with the men at the ice house, whose voices are weakened by drink, whose words are often replaced by belches. Yet before the alcohol takes over, they are the leading gossips of the town: “the whispering begins at sunset at the ice house” (50). When Cisneros shows the direct speech of Maximiliano, she reveals a voice of crude misogyny: “What she needs is . . . and made a gesture as if to yank a woman’s buttocks to his groin. . . . Maximiliano who was said to have killed his wife in an ice-house brawl when she came at him with a mop. I had to shoot, he had said—she was armed” (51). All the others laugh. Again, the inferences are clear: the physical abuse Cleófilas endures is part of a larger atmosphere of male hostility in which she lives. The effect is to make her situation seem more hopeless.

MC: Again, I’m struck by how compatible your specific analyses are with my approach. Perhaps we share more than we initially thought.

RT: Well, we’re both interested in the connections between voice and ideology, and Cisneros certainly seems to be attuned to those connections as well. Let’s keep going: what are your thoughts about Graciela’s voice?

MC: Graciela is comfortable with both American English and Spanish; American idioms flow off her tongue, even as her voice combines pragmatism with compassion and with irony. Her casual remark to Felice that life in the clinic is “A regular soap opera sometimes” (55) contains an irony that runs deeper than she realizes because of the comparison the story makes between the telenovelas and “Woman Hollering Creek” itself. This point also reinforces my earlier observation that the apparent orality of Graciela’s speech—indeed, of all the voices—is actually a product of Cisneros’s writing. That writing gives us not a transcription of Chicana speech but a representation of it that serves Cisneros’s anti-telenovela. What would you say about Felice?

RT: Like Graciela, Felice is comfortable in both American English and in Spanish, but her voice represents qualities in a woman’s speech Cleófilas has never before heard: freedom, unconventionality, joie de vivre, strength. Felice’s hollering as she crosses the creek is the clearest expression of these qualities, but her dialogue confirms the point:

Did you ever notice . . . how nothing around here is named after a woman. Unless she’s the Virgin. I guess you’re only famous if you’re a virgin. . . .

That’s why I like the name of that arroyo. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right? (55)

And a little later: “I used to have a Pontiac Sunbird. But those cars are for viejas. Pussy cars. Now this here is a real car.” (55).
Cleófilas initially does not know what to make of Felice. "What kind of talk was that coming from a woman?," she wonders. Cisneros invites us to infer that it's the talk of a Chicana lesbian (more butch than femme?), perhaps the partner of Graciela, perhaps not, but certainly a woman who is comfortable with her identity. That Cleófilas responds so positively to her and her hollering is, thus, all the more telling.

MC: OK, fine. What about Cleófilas's voice, especially since she so rarely speaks directly?

RT: Yes, although much of the narration is focalized through Cleófilas, her direct speech doesn't appear until after Cleófilas persuades Juan Pedro that she needs to see the doctor. The scene itself starts with indirect discourse, but once Cleófilas's succeeds in persuading her husband, Cisneros gives us her voice: "Yes. Next Tuesday at five-thirty. I'll have Juan Pedrito dressed and ready. But those are the only shoes he has. I'll polish them, and we'll be ready. As soon as you come from work. We won't make you ashamed" (53). Although Cleófilas remains subordinate to her husband, her voice here assumes a greater equality than we have seen before: she is taking charge of the visit and reassuring him. This development with Cleófilas's voice here fits with a larger shift in the progression, which I'd now like to discuss.

MC: Tell me what you mean by progression.

RT: It's a term I use to talk about the way in which a story generates its movement from beginning to end—both the details of that movement and the larger principles and purposes governing those details. Progressions can involve both story and discourse, both the what and the how of narrative. At the level of story, narratives typically introduce, complicate, and resolve (to one degree or another) instabilities between and among characters; at the level of discourse, narratives sometimes introduce tensions between narrators and the authorial audience, through such things as the unreliability of the narrator or a marked discrepancy between the narrator's knowledge and the audience's. By talking about instabilities, tensions, and audiences, I am trying to capture the sense in which progression exists both in the narrative text and in the reader's experience of it. Progression, in other words, is a term designed to capture the dynamics of narrative—the textual logic of movement from beginning to end and the experience of following that logic as we read from page the first to page the last. Although instabilities and tensions are the engine driving any progression, other elements of narrative can contribute to narrative dynamics through their role in affecting the audience's understanding of and response to the main sequence of instabilities and tensions. For this reason, some of the conclusions we have already reached about "Woman Hollering Creek" in our discussion of time and voice will be relevant to the analysis of progression.

MC: Can you illustrate how some of our earlier discussion fits with an analysis of the progression?

RT: Sure. Cisneros's use of nonlinear time is part and parcel of her giving us a lyric
rather than a narrative progression. That is, after introducing the central instability, Cleófilas’s unhappy marriage, and the possible, though imperfect, resolution, her return home, Cisneros neither complicates nor begins to resolve this instability until section twelve. Instead, between sections two and eleven, the instability doesn’t change but its texture and depth are gradually revealed. Furthermore, the lyric structure invites us to do what we do in lyric poetry: rather than staying outside the representation and judging, we imaginatively participate in the character’s situation. Given Cisneros’s interest in showing us Cleófilas trapped in Seguín, her handling of time is especially appropriate. Her frequent use of the iterative and her scrambling of the chronological relations between scenes very effectively convey the sense of painful repetition in Cleófilas’s life.

But let me ask you here about the telenovelas. In your book, you argue that we ought not to assume that people such as Cleófilas will be uncritical readers; on the contrary, you suggest, their reading against the grain of dominant ideology can be a very effective tactic. Wouldn’t you want to take Cisneros to task for condescending to her characters in her representation of Cleófilas and the other women of her hometown as so deeply taken in by the fantasies of the telenovelas?

MC: Perhaps you are asking, who is to be master, my theory or Cisneros’s story? I would not want to answer your question with reference only to Cisneros’s representation of the women’s responses to the telenovelas. The whole story matters, and since it shows Cleófilas’s dawning awareness of the gap between those telenovelas and her actual life, I do not find Cisneros condescending to her; instead, I see Cisneros as starting with Cleófilas as a woman who has internalized the messages of the telenovelas. But tell me more about the progression.

RT: In these first eleven sections, Cisneros introduces and complicates the narrative’s main tension: what is the meaning behind the name of the creek? In section four, we learn that Cleófilas wants to know that meaning, but “no one could say whether the woman hollered from anger or pain” and, indeed, “Woman Hollering” was “a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood” (46). At the end of section four, we learn that upon first hearing the name, Cleófilas “had laughed” because she thought it “such a funny name for a creek so pretty and full of happily ever after” (47). In section nine, we see that Cleófilas, now a mother, no longer thinks that the creek’s name is funny or that its sound is full of happily ever after. Instead, she wonders whether the creek, with “its high, silver voice,” is “La Llorona, the weeping woman. La Llorona, who drowned her own children” (51). She becomes “sure” that La Llorona is calling to her. The link between “La Gritona,” “La Llorona,” and Cleófilas’s situation suggests that Cleófilas is right to be sure, and so, this tension appears to be resolved.

MC: But the ending changes our view, as Felice shows Cleófilas another possible meaning for the name of “La Gritona.” Is Cisneros setting a trap for the reader? Is there some tactic there to teach us about presuming too much?

RT: If you want to call it that, OK. My preference would be to see the apparent res-
olution as something following naturally from the technique of leaving so much to the reader’s inference. And the effect of the apparent resolution is to deepen our sense of Cleófilas’s sorrow and grief. It works very well.

The second striking feature of the progression within the first eleven sections is that Cisneros gives us two pairs of sections that are each repetitions with a difference. Section nine is a variation of section one, as Cisneros gives us Cleófilas’s thoughts as she plays with her child beside the creek; section eleven is a variation of section five, as Cisneros recounts Juan Pedro’s abuse of Cleófilas. In section one, we acquire only a general knowledge of Cleófilas’s situation; by section nine, with its apparent resolution of the tension, we know all that is entailed by her thoughts of how her love has “soured.” Indeed, by section nine, most of the lyric revelation is complete; all that is needed is the fuller revelation of the circle of male hostility that Cisneros provides in the description of Maximiliano at the ice house in section ten. Section eleven, the other scene of repetition, represents Juan Pedro hitting Cleófilas with a book, but it does not explicitly contain any significantly new revelations about Cleófilas’s situation.

**MC:** Is section eleven unnecessary then? Indeed, it may be a gratuitous representation of male violence and oppression.

**RT:** If section eleven were only reminding us that Cleófilas is a battered wife, then I’d answer in the affirmative. But it’s doing more than that. The book Juan Pedro throws at Cleófilas is a love story by Corín Tellado that she is reading as a substitute for the telenovelas, since she has no television. The incident becomes the occasion for Cleófilas to think about the difference between the romantic love stories of the telenovelas and her own life: “Cleófilas thought her life would have to be like that, like a telenovela, only now the episodes got sadder and sadder. And there were no commercials in between for comic relief. And no happy ending in sight. . . . Everything happened to women with names like jewels. But what happened to a Cleófilas? Nothing. But a crack in the face” (52–53).

**MC:** Right, and the scene shows that Cisneros does not condescend to Cleófilas as a reader of the narratives of dominant culture. Of course Cleófilas does not do a tactical reading of Corin Tellado but she does finally perceive and acknowledge the gap between the commercialized romances and the realities of her life.

**RT:** And that admission has important consequences. When we read in section twelve that Cleófilas is persuading Juan Pedro to take her to the doctor, when we hear her speaking voice for the first time, and when that voice assumes an equality with her husband’s, we infer that Cleófilas’s thinking has reached a new stage. She has stopped waiting for things to happen to her, and she has now begun to take some responsibility for her own unromantically painful life. “Why is she so anxious?” to see the doctor, Juan Pedro wants to know. “Because she is going to make sure the baby is not turned around backward this time to split her down the center” (53). It is this same desire to take responsibility for her life that allows her to go along with
Graciela’s plan and that gives her the courage to stand by the Cash N Carry and wait for Felice, despite her fear that she will be discovered by Juan Pedro.

MC: Or in my terms, between sections eleven and twelve Cleófilas achieves the realization that she can and must find some room for maneuver in her oppressive situation. In short, she realizes that she can become a tactician.

RT: OK, but I worry that you want to allegorize again. However we describe the change, this understanding about Cleófilas’s new attitude helps account for the details of the ending. “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). Although this laughter surprises both Cleófilas and us, Cisneros has also made it an appropriate surprise, one that makes sense given Cleófilas’s own small steps toward independence.

I also see another reason why Cisneros represents the final event through the narrator rather than through a direct rendering of Cleófilas’s voice. In section five, Cisneros has emphasized the connection between voice, the body, and oppression. Overpowered not only physically but also emotionally and psychologically by the violence to her body, Cleófilas can neither act nor speak:

She had always said she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her.

But when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again; until the lip split and bled an orchid of blood, she didn’t fight back, didn’t break into tears, she didn’t run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the telenovelas. . . .

She could think of nothing to say, said nothing. (47)

The final sentences of the story invert the situation of section five, as Cleófilas’s body responds almost involuntarily to the psychological and emotional release she feels in exchanging the presence of her husband (and the larger circle of male hostility) for the company of Felice and the new possibility for female responsibility—and perhaps female sexuality—she represents in Cleófilas’s eyes. This involuntary quality of the response is beautifully captured in the narrator’s sentences, even as the onomatopoeic “gurgling” and the metaphorical “long ribbon of laughter” convey something of the sound of Cleófilas’s voice.

MC: Very fine. We need, though, to come back to something I mentioned earlier: the story’s relation to the myth of “La Llorona.” Despite the points you’ve made about the way Cisneros handles the tension about the name of the creek, we have not addressed this dimension of the story sufficiently.

RT: OK. What do you have in mind?

MC: Let’s think about “Woman Hollering Creek” itself as a practice of everyday
life. Besides offering a counter to the telenovelas, what does Cisneros want to do with it? Her working with “La Gritona” and “La Llorona” indicate that she wants to re-write or at least to add to the narrative surrounding the figure of “La Llorona.” There is a long tradition in Chicano storytelling of the mythical figures being re-interpreted to fit new cultural situations. The myth of “La Malinche,” the Aztec woman who became the interpreter for and sexual partner of Hernando Cortéz, is perhaps the most notable example. Originally thought to be a traitor to her people, La Malinche has been reinterpreted as a figure of resistance, one who managed to maintain her identity as an Aztec and used her influence to preserve the lives of many native Americans. In one version of the story, she drowned a son rather than have Cortéz take him back to Spain. In this version, she and “La Llorona” get conflated, as La Malinche weeps continually about what she has done to her son (see the account in Novas’s Everything You Need to Know about Latino History, 60–62). When Cisneros introduces the question of whether “La Gritona” is weeping from pain or rage, the myths of both La Malinche and La Llorona become relevant to the story.

RT: How, then, does the ending fit into this cultural analysis?

MC: The ending shows Cisneros doing her most significant re-writing of the myths. “La Malinche” and “La Llorona” need not be hollering only from pain or from rage. There are other, more appealing possibilities: women can holler like Tarzan, they can give a hoot as Felice does, they can yell “as loud as any mariachi band” (55), they can laugh in a way that their voices sound just “like water,” just like the high, silvery voice of the creek itself.

Thus, in crossing the physical border marked by the creek, Cleófilas also crosses a psychic border and Cisneros crosses a mythic border, adding the stories of “La Felice” and “La Cleófilas” to the narratives surrounding “La Malinche” and “La Llorona.” If “Woman Hollering Creek” becomes as widely known a work as you and I think it deserves to be, then its stories about “women hollering” are likely to acquire the status of new manifestations of the myth.

In any event, I’d underline the point that in crossing the psychic border, Cleófilas has learned about the importance of becoming a tactician. She has not only managed to find some room for maneuver in her situation but also experienced something she never expected through her efforts to negotiate within the narrow limits available to her.

RT: OK, but let me bring your ideas back to the specifics of the progression in the last section, to the way in which Cisneros’s narrative technique is working. By ending with the unusual move of reintroducing and quickly resolving the tension about “La Gritona,” Cisneros signals that the narrative’s ultimate concern is less with Cleófilas’s external situation—which side of the border she is on, whether she is with her husband or her father or somewhere else—than with her own sense of herself, her life, and its possibilities. The joining of her voice with Felice’s and with the creek’s, made possible in part by her own decision to take some responsibility for her life, signals something more significant than her returning to her father. It also holds out
a possibility for further development and growth along the line that she has now begun to travel. The break in the temporal flow does temper the mood of the ending, but such an effect is desirable. As you've been saying, Cisneros is not offering us a telenovela plot but something much more realistic: one moment of laughter will not change the material conditions of Cleófilas's life. At the same time, the flash forward to Cleófilas's telling is also a hopeful sign, one that shows her using her voice among her father and brothers to recall the extraordinary woman.

If you don't have any objections to those ideas, we can return to our initial concerns about each other's limits—my alleged narrowness, your alleged tendency to flatten things out.

**MC:** What you did with time and with voice convinced me that you don't have to be narrow. But I remain concerned that you always turn in to the technique and, in that sense, away from the bigger cultural issues.

**RT:** And what you did with time and with voice convinced me that you don't have to flatten things out. Nevertheless, I continue to fret that your desire to do cultural analysis may lead you to do that flattening. But perhaps it is fair to say that neither of us could do what the other does, that neither of us wants to do what the other does, yet each recognizes that the other has significantly improved his understanding of "Woman Hollering Creek"?

**MC:** I'll accept that.

**RT:** Should we move on to debate each other's distinctions: strategy and tactics; instabilities and tensions?

**MC:** If I may borrow from the canonical tradition—"hold, enough!"

**WORKS CITED**


