On Not Being La Malinche: 
Border Negotiations of Gender in Sandra Cisneros's 
“Never Marry a Mexican” and 
“Woman Hollering Creek”

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Like many of the stories in Woman Hollering Creek, the title story and “Never Marry a Mexican” describe the advantages and the difficulties of “straddling two countries,” as Cisneros describes the condition of living on the border between Anglo and Mexican cultures. In addition, these two stories deal with a problem specific to women: the female protagonists of “Woman Hollering Creek” and “Never Marry a Mexican” wrestle with Mexican icons of sexuality and motherhood that, internalized, seem to impose on them a limited and even negative definition of their own identities as women. In “Never Marry a Mexican” the protagonist, Clemencia, throws her energy into defying the model of La Malinche, a historical figure who over centuries of patriarchal mythmaking has become the representative of a female sexuality at once passive, “rapeable,” and always already guilty of betrayal. In “Woman Hollering Creek” the protagonist, Cleófilas, must redefine La Llorona, the figure of traditional Mexican folklore who wanders wailing for her lost children, in order to redefine her own possibilities as a woman and a mother. On the one hand, the stories emphasize the tenacity of these icons’ hold on Chicanas’ and Mexican women’s self-images. On the other hand, the protagonists inhabit a border zone between Anglo and Mexican cultures where the perpetual clash and collision of two sets of signifiers, two systems of social myth, can throw any one culture’s gender ideology into question. “Woman Hollering Creek” dramatizes the positive aspect of border living—the possibilities it offers for transformation. But borderland existence can be disabling too: in “Never Marry a Mexican” the ambiguous space between cultures generates only confusion and, finally, a newly rigid gender definition. It is the dialectic between the fluidity of the borderland and the seeming intransigence of internalized icons of womanhood in “Never Marry a Mexican” and “Woman Hollering Creek” that this essay will explore.
It would seem, from what Chicana feminist writers report, that Mexican social myths of gender crystallize with special force in three icons: “Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children.” According to the evidence of Chicana feminist writers, these “three Our Mothers” haunt the sexual and maternal identities of contemporary Mexican and Chicana women. Cherríe Moraga, for instance, asserts that “there is hardly a Chicana growing up today who does not suffer under [La Malinche’s] name.” And Norma Alarcón, writing about the same legendary figure, says, “the pervasiveness of the myth is unfathomable, often permeating and suffusing our very being without conscious awareness.” Cisneros speaks, in her interview with Pilar Aranda, of her own difficulties in growing up with a negative and a positive role model always held up before her—La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe. These “ghosts” still haunt her, she says, and she writes not to exorcise them—that is impossible—but to “make [my] peace with those ghosts.” In an interview with Reed Dasenbrock and Feroza Jussawalla, Cisneros claims that the narrative of Rosario in a third story in the collection, “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” represents her own negotiation with the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe. That story, which I will come back to at the end of this essay, makes it clear that Cisneros considers Mexican icons of femininity to be intimately bound up with individual Chicanas’ and Mexican women’s self-images and self-esteem; to live with them comfortably—and there is no way to run away from them—each woman has to “make her peace with them” in her own way.

A borderland offers a space where such a negotiation with fixed gender ideals is at least possible. Where cultures overlap, definitions become fluid. Cisneros draws attention to the shifting meaning of signifiers in the border zone by using the same “border” phrase to mean two different things: recurring in “Never Marry a Mexican” and “Woman Hollering Creek,” the phrase “en el otro lado”—“on the other side”—can mean either the U. S. or Mexico, shifting its referent according to where the speaker stands. Likewise, “Mexican” in the opening paragraph of “Never Marry a Mexican” means first a Mexican national, then a U. S. citizen of Mexican descent. Fixed definitions waver as the words in which they are moored lose their stability. Cisneros also puts the unitary definitions of things into motion by juxtaposing English and Spanish. For instance, in the story “Bien Pretty” in the same collection, the narrator ponders: “Urracas. Grackles. Urracas. Different ways of looking at the same bird.” The shift from one language to the other and back again implies a shift between cultural codes: the narrator is able to look at the bird from one side of the border, then from
the other. And that "double vision" precludes a single authoritative definition of grackle. As with "grackle," so with "woman." A woman living on the border has a better chance of shaking off the hold of any single culture's gender definition because she has to move back and forth between Mexican and Anglo signifying systems, in, as Gloria Anzaldúa puts it, a "continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each paradigm."

In "Woman Hollering Creek" the word "Woman" (and therewith the gender role) becomes unstable as it is interpreted first within a Mexican symbolic system, then within a Chicana symbolic system. While the Mexican woman, Cleófilas, can hear in the sound of the river called Woman Hollering Creek only the wail of La Llorona, a Mexican figure of sorrowing womanhood, the Chicana Felice interprets the creek's sound—its "hollering"—as a "Tarzan hoot," and so gives both the word "Hollering" and the concept "Woman" a new definition. Felice can go back and forth between cultural paradigms, see things first from a Mexican perspective, then from an Anglo perspective, and take her choice of signifiers (and of mythic figures) from either side. Felice goes to el otro lado—the other side—of the gender border as well, appropriating Tarzan's cry from the territory of masculinity. If border living means that one can move back and forth across national boundaries—if one can choose to see birds as grackles or urracas—why should the border between genders remain inviolable? Why should Tarzan's expressive cry remain eternally and exclusively attached to an icon of masculinity if Felice can use it to express her own vision of womanhood? "Woman Hollering Creek" thus opens up gender definitions on all sides to the fluidity of border existence.

"Never Marry a Mexican," however, complicates the notion of subverting feminine gender roles by borrowing from masculinity: in reaction to the passive sexuality ascribed to La Malinche, Clemencia adopts the aggressive, violent sexual stance of the "chingón," but that tactic fails to release her from the influence of the Malinche legend. Escaping the crippling polarities of gender is not so simple as appropriating the gestures of masculinity, then. (Clemencia's and Felice's subversions of gender—the one failed, the other successful—set up an interesting dialectic with Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance, a dialectic that I explore in the final section of this essay.) Likewise, "Never Marry a Mexican" tempers the optimism of "Woman Hollering Creek" about border existence. If shuttling back and forth between the standpoints of two different cultures can be creative, as it is in "Woman Hollering Creek"—if, as Anzaldúa says, thinking simultaneously through two divergent cultural paradigms can engender a third way of looking at the world, a mestiza way—inhabiting a border zone can also mean getting caught between cultures. Clemencia in
“Never Marry a Mexican” is stranded in the interstices, in “the space between the different worlds she inhabits,” as Anzaldúa puts it. Both “alienated from her mother culture [and] ‘alien’ in the dominant culture,”12 Clemencia does not fully grasp the meanings of either Mexican or Anglo signifying systems.

“The opening paragraph of “Never Marry a Mexican” introduces boundary living as Clemencia’s heritage: “Never marry a Mexican, my ma said once and always. She said this because of my father. She said this though she was Mexican too. But she was born here in the U. S., and he was born there, and it’s not the same, you know” (p. 68). As in Woman Hollering Creek generally, the ambiguity of border existence is immediately tied to the ambiguity of language. “Mexican” seems to mean two different things within the same paragraph: does Mexican mean a Mexican national or a U. S. citizen who identifies as Mexican? This sliding of “Mexican” from one side of the border to the other suggests the entitlement that Clemencia’s birth position gives her to a vision that perceives things from both sides of the border at once. But the ambiguity of the word “Mexican” can also suggest confusion, and in Clemencia’s story Cisneros explores the down side of being a mestiza, the discursive bewilderment that can result from living in the space where two cultural systems meet and conflict. As the focus of verbal ambiguity on the word “Mexican” implies, Clemencia’s discursive confusion encompasses a confusion about her own identity and about her position in both Mexican and Anglo discourses.

In her interview with Aranda, Cisneros describes the discomfort of “being a Mexican woman living in an American society, but not belonging to either culture” as a kind of cultural “schizophrenia”—the negative version of Anzaldúa’s double vision: “We’re not Mexican and in some sense we’re not American. I could not live in Mexico because my ideas are too . . . americanized. On the other hand, I can’t live in America, or I do live here, but, in some ways, almost like a foreigner.”13 In “Never Marry a Mexican” Cisneros dramatizes this double unbelonging through Clemencia’s inability to function in either Anglo or Mexican discourse. “That’s . . . water under the damn,” she remarks, glossing her own speech: “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” (p. 73). The disparity between the discourse “in this country” and the discourse “in our house” leaves Clemencia caught between, at home neither at home nor in “this”—her own—country.
Clemencia's response to bicultural indeterminacy is to throw out the undecidable term—Mexican. In the following passage she is warming to her opening theme, “I've never married and never will” (p. 69), by listing the men she could never marry. But she is also negating the term “Mexican,” apparently unaware of the implications for her own identity:

Mexican men, forget it. For a long time the men clearing off the tables or chopping meat behind the butcher counter or driving the bus I rode to school every day, those weren't men. Not men I considered as potential lovers. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chilean, Colombian, Panamanian, Salvadoran, Bolivian, Honduran, Argentine, Dominican, Venezuelan, Guatemalan, Ecuadorean, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Costa Rican, Paraguayan, Uruguayan, I don't care. I never saw them. My mother did this to me. (p. 69)

While Clemencia attributes her avoidance to her mother's advice, “Never marry a Mexican,” she strays from her mother's discourse—where Mexican means a Mexican national, with Clemencia's father as prototype—into Anglo discourse. She borrows the Anglo habit of lumping all Latinos into a single monolithic identity—“Mexican”—a label that erases individual differences and distinct cultures to consign all brown-skinned persons to a single category. As in (racist) Anglo discourse, Clemencia's word choice blurs the distinction between race and class: “Mexican” here means bus-boys, butchers' assistants, bus drivers—working-class men lumped together under an ethnic label that in actuality designates a class—a class of servers. Clemencia dissociates herself from a Mexican or Mexican American discourse that would define these individuals differently.

But Clemencia has not mastered Anglo discourse either. And using that discourse without fully recognizing its racist values makes her miscalculate her own position in the sexual contract with Drew. To Drew, the white lover who abandoned her eighteen years before and who remains the obsessive center of her thinking, “Mexican” means Clemencia herself, as his own language makes clear when he breaks off their affair: “Hadn't I understood . . . he could never marry me. You didn't think . . . ? Never marry a Mexican. Never marry a Mexican . . . No, of course not. I see. I see” (p. 80). What is a “Mexican”? An inappropriate other. But who that other is depends on where you stand; and Clemencia, caught between two discourses, has a foothold in neither. Although Clemencia of course means the term “Mexican” to apply only to men, only to potential suitors, the word is a shifter in this story, and its shifting does not stop at men, but moves on to designate Clemencia herself. Adopting the Anglo racist definition of “Mexican” ultimately means identifying against herself; and having emptied the term of value (“those weren't men . . . I never saw them”), she is left without resources when “Mexican” confronts her as the
signifier of her own identity. The discursive naiveté that led Clemencia to misinterpret "Mexican," and her own social position, has tragic consequences; abandoned by Drew, she remains in an abstract space between cultures, isolated from both Anglo and Mexican American communities, where she replays in memory scenes from the sexual drama with Drew that took place eighteen years earlier.

Like her tactic of dismissing the signifier "Mexican" without examining her own implication in the cultural context she is throwing out, Clemencia deals with the influence of La Malinche on her sexuality not through introspection, but through outright repudiation of the passive, guilty sexuality that La Malinche models and through the definition of her own sexuality, in opposition, as active, violent, aggressive.

An Aztec princess sold into slavery, Malintzin, or Malinche, eventually became Cortez's translator; she was also his lover and the mother of their son, Don Martín, the first mestizo, of mixed Indian and Spanish parentage. Malinche not only translated for Cortez; she also advised him, giving away religious secrets of the Aztecs that allowed him to impose his authority on them. While the dignity and competence of the historical Malintzin were apparently respected by both Indians and Spanish, after independence Mexican storytellers pinned the blame for the Conquest on her complicity with Cortez and more specifically on her sexual complicity. As Cherrie Moraga explains, "Malintzin, also called Malinche, fucked the white man who conquered the Indian peoples of Mexico and destroyed their culture. Ever since, brown men have been accusing her of betraying her race, and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this 'transgression.'" She is "slandered as La Chingada, meaning the 'fucked one,' or La Vendida, a sell-out to the white race." While it would seem that mastering several languages, giving successful strategic advice, negotiating between Indians and Spaniards, and enabling the Conquest imply an active competence, Malinche is characterized not as doing but as done to: "In the very act of intercourse with Cortez, Malinche is seen as having been violated. She is not, however, an innocent victim, but the guilty party—ultimately responsible for her own sexual victimization." Lack of agency together with guilt: according to Chicana feminists, contemporary Chicanas and Mexican women have to bear the full weight of this paradox. Norma Alarcón writes that "the myth contains the following sexual possibilities: woman is sexually passive, and hence at all times open to potential use by men whether it be seduction or rape. . . . nothing she does is perceived as a choice. Because Malintzin aided Cortés in the Conquest of the New World, she is seen as concretizing woman's sexual weakness . . . always open to sexual exploitation." By virtue of having female genitalia, then, woman is sexually guilty—guilty for being open to the world.
It is against this passive sexual identity that Clemencia defines herself. Although she accepted, laughing, the pet names Drew gave her—“Malinalli, Malinche, my courtesan” (p. 74)—apparently careless of the betrayal connoted by replaying the part of native courtesan to Drew’s white conqueror, she rebels against the model of Malinche as sexually exploited victim, as “the Chingada . . . the Mother forcibly opened, violated.”20 Octavio Paz elaborates all the meanings of chingar in an effort to understand “the strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the Mexican’s imagination.” He argues, “The ultimate meaning always contains the idea of aggression. . . . The verb denotes violence, an emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force.” When chingar is used in the narrowly sexual sense, “the chingón is the macho, the male; he rips open the chingada, the female, who is pure passivity, defenseless against the exterior world. The relationship between them is violent, and it is determined by the cynical power of the first and the impotence of the second.”21 To Clemencia, apparently, one is either the chingada or the chingón—and she chooses to be the chingón. Describing sex with Drew, she says, “I leapt inside you and split you like an apple. Opened for the other to look and not give back” (p. 78). Clemencia not only takes the man’s part—“I leapt inside you”—but she performs the violent actions attached to the verb chingar: “I split you like an apple” appropriates “the idea of breaking, of ripping open” attached to the usually masculine chingar.22 She imagines that this takeover puts Drew in her power: “You were ashamed to be so naked. . . . But I saw you for what you are, when you opened yourself for me” (p. 78). Following the logic of the violator, who pries open what is closed, peels back the protective surface to take possession of what is inside, Clemencia seeks to possess what is now revealed—Drew’s private inner self—through her look; she thus appropriates the power of the male gaze to control, to possess (“to look and not give back”).

Clemencia extends her sexual ravages to women’s bodies, if only in fantasy. In the years since Drew left her, Clemencia has slept with other married men—often while their wives were giving birth. “It’s always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that. . . . To know I’ve had their husbands when they were anchored in blue hospital rooms, their guts yanked inside out” (pp. 76–77). Now it is a woman’s body that is opened up, exposed, vulnerable, while Clemencia, the “gran chingón,” pursues a bitter, vindictive sexual satisfaction23—a kind of rape at one remove.

While Clemencia thus evades the stereotype of sexual victim, it is only by projecting it onto the other—the lover or the other woman—while leaving the gender dynamic of violence in place. And that dynamic imprisons her in a rigid sex role as surely as if the reversal had not taken
place. In the cultural binary ascribed by Paz to the Mexican macho, “there are only two possibilities in life: either [one] inflicts the actions implied by chingar on others, or else [one] suffers them [oneself] at the hands of others.”24 Having bought into this logic, which excludes any alternative to the pair violator/violated, Clemencia must live exclusively on the violator side of the equation; any hint of vulnerability would immediately situ-ate her on the side of victim. Hence, perhaps, her emphatically one-sided self-definition—“I’m vindictive and cruel and I’m capable of anything”—and her equally emphatic determination to live outside the roles of wife and mother: “I’ll never marry . . . I’ve never married and I never will” (pp. 68–69). Having identified herself with the hard, ruthless, closed pole of the open-closed binary, she cannot admit desires to be loved or to nurture and protect, which would align her with the pole of open, vulnerable mother.

Yet it is just those desires that surface in the final lines of the story: “Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely. I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say There, there, it’s all right, honey. There, there, there” (p. 83). This expression of a desire to soothe and console—to mother, in a word25—contradicts the ruthless tone of the whole preceding narrative. It would seem that positioning herself as chingón, “vindictive and cruel,” makes Clemencia subdue maternal impulses to nurture and comfort that, if traditional, are unmistakably her own.26 This concluding return of a repressed desire for tenderness, while surprising, is only the last and most straightforward of eruptions from the underside of Clemencia’s macho discourse. On the narrative surface Clemencia cares only about power, boasting of her power over Drew, whom she paints and repaints, choosing “to birth [him] on canvas. . . . And if that’s not power, what is?” (p. 75), and of her power over women, whom she figuratively “kills” with adultery. Yet underneath runs a subtext of images drawn from maternal processes—conception, gestation, birth, nursing, even incest—which tes-tify to desires for motherhood that Clemencia keeps hidden, even from herself.

On the night Drew’s wife Megan gave birth to their son, for instance, Clemencia positioned herself parallel to the birth process: “While his mother lay on her back laboring his birth, I lay in his mother’s bed making love to [Drew]” (p. 75). She has reenacted this imitation of birth many times, with other men: “And it’s not the last time I’ve slept with a man the night his wife is birthing a baby. Why do I do that, I wonder? Sleep with a man when his wife is giving life, being suckled by a thing with its eyes still shut. Why do that?” It is at this point that she says, “It’s always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that . . . . To know I’ve had their husbands when they were anchored in blue hospital rooms, their
guts yanked inside out, the baby sucking their breasts while their husband sucked mine” (pp. 76–77). While sex is ostensibly the site of Clemencia’s violence against women, the parallel with the suckling baby and mother suggests that sex functions, rather, as a poor substitute for maternity.

Addressing Drew’s son mentally, Clemencia probes further into the workings of the maternal body: “Pretty boy. Little clone. Little cells split into you and you and you. Tell me, baby, which part of you is your mother. I try to imagine . . . her long long legs that wrapped themselves around this father who took me to his bed” (p. 77). Imagining back through the division of cells to the moment of conception, Clemencia here conflates her own body with the mother’s body: “her long long legs” belong to Megan, but in the same phrase it is herself whom “this father took to his bed.” She imagines herself into the very act of conception. Despite the avowed intention of Clemencia to injure Drew’s wife for taking Drew away from her, it seems that Clemencia’s rage reflects envy, not jealousy, in Jessica Benjamin’s sense of the term: “Envy is about being, not having.”  

The various images of maternity suggest that Clemencia does not so much want to have Drew as to be Megan, actively mothering. Hence her claim that she, not Megan, produced the son—from an abstract site of power divorced from the body: “Your son. Does he know how much I had to do with his birth? I was the one who convinced you [Drew] to let him be born. . . . I’m the one that gave him permission and made it happen, see” (pp. 74–75).

Clemencia’s use of gummy bears to mark her invasion of Megan’s territory also demonstrates her ambivalence toward Megan. While Drew is cooking dinner, Clemencia finds a package of gummy bears in her backpack and manages to put one in Megan’s make-up jar, in her nail polish bottle, in her lipstick, even in her diaphragm. This is a language of signs legible to women on both sides of the race/class barrier: “I was here.” Vengeance is hers, then—but again the act of the chingón, penetrating into all of Megan’s most private places, carries a maternal subtext. Clemencia takes apart Megan’s Russian babushka doll until she “got to the very center, the tiniest baby inside all the others . . . this [she] replaced with a gummy bear” (p. 81). Clemencia substitutes her own signifier for the “baby” in the doll-within-a-doll’s innermost compartment, symbolically interrupting the clones of generational succession, each a replication of the same, with her own “difference.” Then, borrowing motherhood, Clemencia puts the purloined “baby” into her pocket, where “all through dinner I kept . . . touch[ing] it, it made me feel good” (p. 82). But on the way home she throws the “baby” into a stagnant creek “where winos piss and rats swim. The Barbie doll’s toy stewing there in that muck. It gave me a feeling like nothing before and since” (p. 82). The episode expresses the

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full range of Clemencia’s ambivalence, an ambivalence shot through with feelings of racial exclusion: as Megan’s baby in Clemencia’s pocket, the doll evokes Clemencia’s “borrowing” of her motherhood; as the toy of the “Barbie doll” (Clemencia’s derisive label for Megan), the doll becomes metonymically identified with a Barbie doll, icon of white woman as idealized sex object. Clemencia’s rage is directed not just against the woman who occupies the position she wants as Drew’s lover and mother of his son, but against the principle that race determines desirability.

Now, some eighteen years later, Clemencia continues a process of revenge against Megan that is simultaneously an imitation of her motherhood. Namely, she has an affair with Drew and Megan’s son:

I sleep with this boy, their son. To make the boy love me the way I love his father. To make him want me, hunger. . . . Come here, mi cariñito. Come to mamita. Here’s a bit of toast.

I can tell from the way he looks at me, I have him in my power. . . . Come to mamita. . . . I let him nibble. . . . Before I snap my teeth. (p. 82)

Again, Clemencia’s ostensible motive is power—sexual power over the son, which gives her indirect power over his parents. But the rhetoric of nurturing and maternal endearment, which blends into the discourse of mastery, suggests that underneath she is continuing her peripheral relation to mothering. Clemencia seems to have taken a stand outside conventional marriage and family—“I’ve never married and never will” (p. 69)—only to force her way back in through the most enmeshed of family relations, incest: “You could be my son . . .” (p. 76).

Just before the concluding upsurge of repressed maternal yearning directed to the world at large—“There, there, it’s all right, honey. There, there, there” (p. 83)—Clemencia has a sudden insight into the physical life of the mother she has been imitating. She imagines how it feels to be Drew in bed “with that wife beside you, warm, radiating her own heat, alive under the flannel and down and smelling a bit like milk and hand cream, and that smell familiar and dear to you, oh” (p. 83). The wistful tone of Clemencia’s description suggests that she glimpses the contrast between the concrete reality of the maternal body—warm, alive, smelling, radiating heat—and the insubstantiality of her own position in an abstract space.

The reader, misled for a time by the vividness of the questions and comments Clemencia addresses to Drew and his son, gradually comes to realize that there is no audience. Clemencia’s narrative is a monologue that reflects her spiritual isolation. She is doubly marginalized. First, she exists in a margin of maternity, obsessed, but in the abstract, with maternal
processes—metaphors, only, of conception, gestation, birth, nursing, and nurturing. Second, she occupies an uneasy position marginal to both Mexican and Anglo discourses. She is unable to grasp how race and gender discourses of Anglo culture situate her in relation to her white lover (she can't read the injunction, “Never marry a Mexican,” from Drew's standpoint); and, having thrown out Mexican culture wholesale, she is too distanced to read the signs provided by traditional Mexican stories. For she remembers a scene she used to play with Drew fondly, apparently without realizing its implications:

Drew, remember when you used to call me your Malinalli? It was a joke, a private game between us, because you looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours. My skin dark against yours. Beautiful, you said. . . .

My Malinalli, Malinche, my courtesan, you said, and yanked my head back by the braid. Calling me that name in between little gulps of breath and the raw kisses you gave, laughing from that black beard of yours. (p. 74)

Clemencia calls attention to all the details—her hair, a braid in the style of an indigenous woman, her skin, dark against her lover's, her willing acceptance of the white man's sexual domination, even his violence—that place her squarely in the role of La Malinche, playing the part of traitor to her race in a white man's sexual games. Yet she does not see that she and Drew went on playing out the Malinche script: after exploiting her talents and her sexuality, Drew abandoned her as Cortez abandoned La Malinche after the Conquest.

Despite Clemencia's determination to throw out the Mexican ideology that ties her sexuality to La Malinche's, her life remains shackled to the Malinche story. Why? Clemencia's metaphor for her mother, whom she also denies, will perhaps throw light on what is wrong with Clemencia's tactic of repudiation. Clemencia says that she has not been able to mourn her mother's death because, before she died, her mother was to her what a crippled leg was to the little finch she used to have: the leg got twisted in a bar of the cage, then “dried up and fell off. My bird lived a long time without it, just a little red stump of a leg” (p. 73). Her memory of her dead mother is “like that”: “like if something already dead dried up and fell off, and I stopped missing where she used to be” (p. 73). Her mother was “already dead” to her before she died: “where she used to be” was already an empty place. How can she mourn the absence of an absence? But if one follows the metaphor to completion—past what Clemencia intends—it seems that negation is insufficient to free her from the maternal connection. Clemencia has rejected her mother for marrying a white man and transferring her love, loyalty, and property to the new family. But denial of the mother—“like my ma didn't exist . . . Like if I never had a mother . . .
Like I never even had one” (p. 73)—leaves her still attached, as the analogy with the bird’s still connected stump suggests. The mother continues as a denied but still present appendage that spreads its deadness across Clemencia’s living potentials. For although Clemencia sees her refusal to marry as an independent stance, the insistent negatives, “I’ll never marry. Not any man. . . . No. I’ve never married and never will. . . . those weren’t men. Not men. . . . I never saw them” (pp. 68–69), can be read as extensions of her mother’s injunction, “Never marry a Mexican.” The mother’s negative spirit, encapsulated in the phrase, remains to frame the negative space where Clemencia lives, as it frames the text.

What is true for Clemencia’s mother is true for the various signifiers of Mexican culture that Clemencia repudiates. The troubled identity of “Mexican” continues to plague Clemencia (as Drew’s speech reminds us) in spite of her erasure of Mexicans as persons. She continues to act out La Malinche and Cortez—both sides, in fact—despite her willed repudiation of the gender ideology they embody. Because they are part of her social formation, they remain part of her inner life—dead remnants attached to her like stumps.

Are cultural icons then inescapable? “Never Marry a Mexican” seems to say they are. In “Woman Hollering Creek” Cisneros is more optimistic about the possibility of changing one’s affiliation with damaging social myths. And hope for change rests precisely on the ground that seems so barren in “Never Marry a Mexican,” the ground of a Mexican American woman’s consciousness where two cultures meet. Felice, the Chicana woman in “Woman Hollering Creek,” is a mestiza in Anzaldúa’s sense—a woman who can balance the contradictory paradigms of Anglo and Mexican cultures in a single vision and out of their contradictions create “a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves.”29 When Cleófilas, the Mexican protagonist, comes into contact with Felice’s mestiza vision, the resulting “cultural collision”30 jolts Cleófilas into a new way of seeing Mexican myths of gender, liberating her from a debilitating identification with La Llorona.

“Woman Hollering Creek”

In “Woman Hollering Creek” Cisneros juxtaposes the heroines of contemporary Mexican telenovelas with the traditional figure La Llorona to imply that then, now, and always the ideals of femininity that Mexican popular culture presents to its women are models of pain and suffering. As the story begins, Cleófilas leaves her father and six brothers in Mexico to marry Don Pedro and move with him across the border to Texas. Cleófilas
has been prepared for love and marriage largely by the *telenovelas* she watched as a girl growing up in a small Mexican town. "What [she] has been waiting for," single-mindedly, for years, is passion—"passion in its purest crystalline essence. The kind the . . . *telenovelas* describe when one finds, finally, the great love of one's life, and does whatever one can, must do, at whatever the cost" (p. 44). On the surface, the *telenovelas*’ idealization of love ill prepares Cleófilas for the actualities of marriage: her new husband "doesn't look like the men on the *telenovelas*" (p. 49), and married life doesn’t imitate their plots, either. More subtly, though, as Frances Restuccia has pointed out, the *telenovelas*’ lesson that one must do "whatever one can . . . at whatever the cost" (p. 44), in order to keep on loving, prepares Cleófilas for the submissions of a beaten wife. The *telenovelas* glamorize pain as a necessary part of love, so that Cleófilas and her friends in Mexico adopt the idea of suffering and make it part of their life plans: "Somehow one ought to live one's life like that. . . . Because to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow" (p. 45).

While Cleófilas is shocked, when her husband beats her for the first time, to discover that the pains of love can be physical as well as emotional, the acceptance of suffering inculcated by the *telenovelas*—"the pain all sweet"—readies her for the part of beaten wife:

The first time she had been so surprised she didn’t cry out or try to defend herself. 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, she didn’t break into tears, she didn’t run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the *telenovelas*. . . .

Instead . . . she had been so stunned, it left her speechless, motionless, numb. She had done nothing but reach up to the heat on her mouth and stare at the blood on her hand as if even then she didn’t understand. (pp. 47–48)

Stunned into silence by the dissonance of the beating with all her beliefs about love and marriage, Cleófilas remains silent as the beatings continue because there is "no place to go," no one to talk to. Gone is the female community of her Mexican hometown whose shared values and gossiping intimacy are reflected in the narrative voice of the earlier, Mexican sections. In Texas, there is no female community—"no huddled whispering on the church steps each Sunday . . . here the whispering begins at sunset at the ice house instead" (p. 50)—and that is a gossiping among men, hostile to women. Cleófilas turns for companionship to the only female entity available, a creek named "La Gritona," or "the shouting woman":

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“The stream . . . 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? 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” (p. 51). Finding the heroines of the telenovelas useless as models for her present life situation, Cleófilas falls back on an icon of Mexican tradition; but Mexican folklore joins with contemporary Mexican popular culture in offering Cleófilas only ideals of passive female suffering. “Pain is sweet,” say the telenovelas, and the traditional figure of La Llorona is caught up in eternal sorrow, lamenting the loss of her children.

While the oral tradition to which La Llorona belongs is lively, generating ever new versions of what she suffered (three of my Chicana students related three different versions of the legend, told them by their mothers), what remains consistent through all the different versions is the sound of La Llorona’s eerie wail. Usually, she is presented as a mother who has drowned her children and now roams searching for them. In one version, for instance, she kills her three children because they get in the way of her wild living; after her own death, God sends her back to seek them eternally. In another version, the figure is fused with La Malinche: when Cortez wanted to take their son back to Spain with him, Malinche killed the son, then herself, rather than be separated from her child; since then, her spirit roams, moaning “Aayy!”32 In other legends, La Llorona as the ghost of La Malinche mourns her lost children, the Indians whom she betrayed to Cortez. La Llorona’s wail is sometimes said to have preceded Cortez, to have been one of the eight omens in Tenochtitlan that foretold the Conquest: in that case the children La Llorona grieves for are the Indians about to be slaughtered, and her cry continues through the centuries to mourn the loss of the indigenous civilization.33 Most often, La Llorona appears by the shore of a river or lake—she is said to have drowned her children—and sometimes she acts as siren, enticing men into the water to die.34 While the circumstances of her story change, La Llorona’s cry of sorrow remains. That wail of inarticulate pain, reflected in the river’s indeterminate grito, or shout—which Cleófilas reads as “pain or rage” (pp. 47, 56)—offers Cleófilas an analogue to her own inarticulate misery.

While Cisneros describes only Cleófilas’s first beating, she indicates that Cleófilas is baffled because she is caught in a classic cycle of domestic violence like the one that Lenore Walker describes, where the phase of intense battering is followed by a phase of loving contrition:35 “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” (p. 48). Classic, too, are the obstacles to escape: a dependent child, a new pregnancy, a lack of money and mobility, a social
climate that condones violence against women (the men who drink with her husband in the ice house joke about how one of them killed his wife), and, perhaps most debilitating, Cleófilas's isolation.

Drawing on Mexican culture for support, Cleófilas finds only a figure that reflects her helpless suffering: identifying with La Llorona's frozen sorrow means accepting her lot as beaten wife, bound into a circle of uncomprehending pain, unable to articulate her experience or to find release through action. That identification offers a still more dreadful possibility: "La Llorona calling to her. She is sure of it. Cleófilas sets the baby's Donald Duck blanket on the grass. Listens. . . . The baby pulling up fistfuls of grass and laughing. La Llorona. Wonders if something as quiet as this drives a woman to the darkness under the trees" (p. 51). The juxtaposition of La Llorona, "who drowned her own children" (p. 51), with the baby laughing in its innocence creates the dread that Cleófilas will answer La Llorona's "call," drown her child, and so enter fully into La Llorona's mourning.

But a Chicana figure provides Cleófilas with a more positive role model. Cleófilas prevails on her husband to take her to a prenatal clinic. The reader is then privy to one side of a telephone conversation in which Graciela, a Mexican American nurse-practitioner at the clinic, describes Cleófilas's bruised body and persuades her friend Felice to give Cleófilas a ride to the Greyhound station in San Antonio so she can take the bus back to her hometown in Mexico. Graciela's conversation contains a last reference to Cleófilas's imprisonment in the Mexican iconography of suffering womanhood: "her name's Cleófilas. . . . One of those Mexican saints, I guess. A martyr or something" (p. 54). Graciela clearly sets herself apart from Mexican culture here, as in her condescension toward Cleófilas, whom she regards as "other"—"another one of those brides from across the border," who "doesn't even speak English" (p. 54).

The distance between Chicana and Mexican culture becomes even more apparent when her friend Felice drives Cleófilas and her small son across "La Gritona," or Woman Hollering Creek, on the way to San Antonio:

But when they drove across the arroyo, the driver opened her mouth and let out a yell as loud as any mariachi. . . .

Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. Pues, I holler. . . . Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she's the Virgin. I guess you're only famous if you're a virgin. She was laughing again.

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

Felice "said this in a Spanish pocked with English and laughed" (p. 55). The Chicana, who stands astride Anglo and Mexican cultures, is not cap-
tive to the myths of either culture: she can hear in the creek's voice either La Llorona's lament or Tarzan's cry, and take her pick. The creek is a "Woman," but unlike the landmarks named after the Virgin that annoy Felice, its name does not impose a single definition of femininity—nor is it confined to a single culture: the creek has both a Mexican and an English name. The indeterminacy of the creek's name, as of its sound, enables Felice to define "woman" for herself. When she hears the woman/creek's voice as a "Tarzan hoot," she appropriates for women the privileges of freedom and mobility usually associated with masculinity and comically exaggerated in Tarzan's hypermobility and freedom from all social constraints. Felice's *grito* may also be read as a call to arms, to the cause of female solidarity, which now rescues Cleófilas from domestic abuse, as in a Mexican general's *grito* to rally his troops or as in Tarzan's call to rally the elephants to Jane's rescue.

Cisneros does not problematize Felice's use of male codes to define a new female self, as she clearly does Clemencia's appropriation of the *chingón* persona. Felice drives a pickup truck; but rather than subject that symbol of masculine autonomy and power to doubts about the "gender trouble" involved in taking on the outward trappings of masculinity, Cisneros presents the pickup, through Cleófilas's admiring wonder, as the outward sign of Felice's independence, freedom of choice, and mobility—it is the vehicle, after all, of her effective action in the world, as she drives Cleófilas and her son to safety.

Everything about this woman, this Felice, amazed Cleófilas. The fact that she drove a pickup... when Cleófilas asked if it was her husband's, she said she didn't have a husband. The pickup was hers. She herself had chosen it. She herself was paying for it...

... Felice was like no woman she'd ever met. Can you imagine, when we crossed the *arrroyo* she just started yelling like a crazy, she would say later to her father and brothers. Just like that. Who would've thought?

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. (pp. 55–56)

To the Mexican woman whose sexual and maternal identity is imbricated with her culture's imagos of women, the Chicana's bicultural—and cross-gender—flexibility opens a new range of female possibilities. Not only does the *llorar* of the stream give way to a resounding *grito*, not only does Cleófilas see beyond the whimpering lamentation of the long-suffering woman to the possibility of a woman who shouts out triumphantly "a yell as loud as any mariachi" (p. 55), but the example of Felice's loud self-
assertion apparently enables Cleófilas to regain her own voice. She shapes her experience into the story she will tell her father and brothers.

Beyond Cleófilas’ cognitive appreciation of women’s alternatives in the paragraph cited above comes a leap into identification. The story ends: “Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn’t Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of [Cleófilas’s] own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (p. 56). Cleófilas has a demonstrated talent for identification, first with the telenovelas’ heroines, then with the creek and La Llorona. Here Cleófilas crosses over ego boundaries as well as national boundaries to identify with Felice. Her laughter, indistinguishable at first from Felice’s, expresses in her own voice the female exuberance Felice has been modeling for her. The further description of her laughter as a “gurgle,” a “ribbon of . . . water,” suggests that this is a three-way merger. The promised identification with the creek has occurred—an identification no longer destructive now that the river’s murmur can be heard as a celebration of female autonomy and mobility.

In this story where naming is so vital, there is even a hint (buried in Graciela’s phone conversation with Felice) that Cleófilas might well use her gift for identification to imitate Felice’s autonomy in choosing her own names, her own female models. Before the encounter with Felice Cleófilas could only wish for a name like the telenovelas’ heroines—“somehow she would have to change her name to Topazio, or Yessenia, Cristal, Adriana, Stefania, Andrea, something more poetic than Cleófilas. Everything happened to women with names like jewels” (p. 53); or she would have to name her mute suffering after La Llorona, thus squeezing her own experience into culturally validated categories, living “happily ever after” (p. 47) or mutely enduring one’s suffering. Graciela’s tongue-in-cheek remark on the phone to Felice—“When her kid’s born she’ll have to name her after us” (p. 55)—suggests the possibility of a naming that is less coerced by the ideological forces of myth and history, a naming that passes on to the next generation a more positive model of female autonomy (“Graciela” means graceful, and “Felice” means happy).

The narrative movement of the story imitates the abrupt change in Cleófilas’s fortunes. Just as the cycle of battering begins to seem inevitable to a woman captive to domestic violence, so the reader of this story feels increasingly trapped in a downward trajectory of events that appears to lead inevitably to more violence. The intervention of the Chicana community in the last three pages, which frees Cleófilas from the helpless isolation of the battered woman, also releases the reader from this narrative impasse. The very Swiftness of the turn-around gives the reader a lift of spirit that enhances the text’s celebration of the possibility that a Chicana perspective can transform Mexican cultural myths. What Felice does
for Cleófilas is a synecdoche for what Cisneros is doing for the reader: rewriting a traditional Mexican story of gender to turn a lament into a shout of triumph or of joy.

Beyond the Borders of the Story: A Dialectic on Gender between “Never Marry a Mexican,” “Woman Hollering Creek,” and “Little Miracles, Kept Promises”

Felice is able to use the fluidity of the borderland creatively to produce a new vision of womanhood; Clemencia’s effort at transformation fails: what is the difference between the two? Is Cisneros pointing to a specific psychological or social positioning that enables one to function well in a border situation? While one might wish for a clear and simple answer, Cisneros is not in the business of handing out morals for better border living or for managing traditional icons of womanhood; the two stories take their place with other stories in the collection to mark possible positions on a broad spectrum of accommodations to living between Anglo and Mexican cultures. Nonetheless, issues common to the two stories and to a third story, “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” set up a dialectic that I would like now to explore.

Clemencia lives out the consequences of adopting a masculine role in “Never Marry a Mexican.” She insists on being as far away as she can get from the pole of violable femininity, and so she leaps to the masculine pole just as narrowly defined, following Mexican tradition, as aggressive and violent. That masquerade leads to the self-deprivation that identification with any gender role does—to the denial of half her capacities and desires, the so-called “feminine” qualities of tenderness, comfort, and compassion. Susan Gubar argues that it does not strengthen female identity to leave it behind in favor of masculinity. Just the opposite: the necessity of abjuring womanhood in favor of masculine impersonation calls attention to the weakness of being a woman. And acting out masculinity leaves the underlying womanhood unaltered. Indeed, although Clemencia enjoys making the boasts of the chingón—“I’m guilty of having caused deliberate pain to other women. I’m vindictive and cruel” (p. 68)—she falls back on traditional “women’s wiles” when she tries to act on the world outside her own sexual theater: waiting (“I’ve been waiting patient as a spider all these years,” p. 75), jealous scheming against the “other woman,” and manipulating men through giving and withholding sexuality. Clemencia’s wholesale rejection of the sexuality associated with La Malinche neither redefines womanhood nor grants her possession of the power associated with
masculinity, but leaves femininity and masculinity still standing as polar opposites, with Clemencia oscillating between.

In the light of Clemencia's failed appropriation of a masculine position, a reader may look askance, in retrospect, at Felice's imitation of Tarzan in "Woman Hollering Creek." Just as the chingón persona that Clemencia adopts exaggerates the aggressiveness conventionally associated with masculinity, so the figure of Tarzan enacts a construct of essential masculinity: muscular, mobile, masterful. Is not moving from La Llorona to Tarzan, from a stereotype of helplessly suffering femininity to an ideal of supermasculine agency, as much of a leap and as unavailing to women who have to function in the real world as the move from la chingada to el chingón? As I have argued, however, while Clemencia moves between the poles of a binary opposition, Felice positions herself on a border. That is, Felice goes back and forth across the gender border as freely as she goes across the border between Mexican and Anglo signifying systems, picking what she likes, selectively, from either side, as forms to express her own feelings. Looking to Tarzan for inspiration does not limit her to a masculine stance: while she hollers like a man, Tarzan, she does so as a woman, responding to the creek's invitation to imitate a "woman hollering." Similarly with her pickup: she adopts the masculine symbol of the pickup truck to enhance a woman's mobility—her own mobility and that of the woman she carries away from abuse. To the objection that Felice's adoption of a pickup is too easy or too unexamined a way of appropriating the freedom and mobility traditionally associated with masculinity, a biographical note will perhaps suggest a response. Cisneros herself drives a pickup, she said at a recent conference, and it is "menstrual blood red." Crossing the gender border and combining signifiers from both sides throws into question not Felice's (or Cisneros's) womanliness, but the gendered logic that assigns objects and gestures exclusively to one side or the other of a gender divide.

To put my analysis in terms of the ongoing feminist debate on gender construction and deconstruction: if gender is "performative," as Judith Butler argues—a temporal construct of gestures and speech acts infinitely repeated to give the illusion of a stable gender identity—if, in other words, gender is a discursive effect merely, then Felice's refusal to perpetuate the discourse of a unitary gender identity effectively deconstructs the "natural" category of exclusive femininity, and thus the feminine/masculine binary. Butler's theory seems useful on the level of social reality: that is, if many persons across a culture were performing disruptive gender acts, then parody, displacement, and "proliferating gender configurations" like Felice's would be enough to make visible the imitative, constructed nature of gender and to suggest alternatives.

But the fact that gender is constructed does not make its hold less tena-
cious. Because Felice is on stage for only two pages, the reader is not privy to the struggles she went through to reach the point of masterful play with the signifiers of gender; Clemencia’s example, meanwhile, throws into question the efficacy of acts and speech acts to shake the hold of gender on the individual consciousness. Clemencia embraces the performance of an alternative gender identity on every level: in gesture and speech act, in mental act too, she performs the chingón. Yet she remains caught in a cultural construction of gender, split between performing the male part and “acting like a woman.” Butler’s optimism about the ability of the subject to change through speech acts seems to be founded on a notion of the subject as produced exclusively by discourse: “To be constituted by language is to be produced within a given network of power/discourse which is open to resignification, redeployment, subversive citations from within and interruption and inadvertent convergence within such networks.”

In other words, the very iterability that produces the illusion of gender continuity also creates the possibility of slippage, opening up rigid gender structures to redefinition. But gender is both a discursive category to be contested and an integral element of a person’s sense of who she (or he) is, as Stephen Frosh and Lynne Layton have recently argued. Gender ideology is intransigent because it produces the subject in question, so that conventional notions of gender ground not just cultural representations but self-representations as well. So an exclusive focus on the discursive possibilities for gender subversion minimizes both the complexity of gender identity acquisition and the cultural work required to change a gender identification. Some theory that takes the psychological production of subjectivity—both discursive and prediscursive—into account is necessary to bridge the gap that Butler’s discourse theory leaves between the social signifying order and the individual psyche. Perhaps some attention to processes of identification can provide such a bridge.

Cisneros’s tales of gender emphasize the force and tenacity of identificatory processes in the creation of gender identity; but “Woman Hollering Creek” also suggests the power of identification to change gender affiliations. Cleófilas’s identification with the telenovelas’ heroines leads her to absorb their attitudes toward life (love is everything, love is pain, pain is sweet). This identification with the image of the other on the screen is akin to mirror stage identification, when according to Lacan the ego is born out of the child’s misidentification with the image in the mirror. Imaginary identification, then, carries the force of that early misrecognition and operates discursively, persuading Cleófilas to take on her culture’s definition of womanhood as suffering. Here identification functions as interpellation, “the process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation and so be-
comes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact imaginary."

But identification does not always operate hegemonically. Take Cleófilas's identification with Felice. If Cleófilas were constituted entirely by discourse, such that the identity of woman as loving and suffering for love were the only one that seemed "real" to her, then she would see Felice's gender position as bizarre and repellant. Yet she can identify with Felice and thus with a liberatory model of womanhood. What enables her to do this?

Identification is an archaic process that long predates the entry into language. In Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego Freud establishes identification as "the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person" and specifies that "identification endeavors to mould a person's own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model." The two statements, taken together, imply that identification operates in the earliest stages of self-formation. In adult years, identification bears the mark of its primitive origins: when I identify with you, I do not make fine discriminations or choose selectively which traits to mimic, but experience identification as totalizing and immediate. I walk and talk and move like you and experience your beauty and power as my own. In "Sameness and difference: Toward an 'overinclusive' theory of gender development," Benjamin charts the gender identifications that take place over a child's first four years of life: until the oedipal stage (roughly the fourth year) the child identifies with both mother and father, elaborating these identifications in imitative play. Benjamin argues that the long developmental process of identifying with multiple roles creates as its (unconscious) legacy an adult capacity for identifying with various gender positions. Benjamin thus claims for identificatory processes the power to connect with difference and to undermine the rigidity of fixed gender roles. "Woman Hollering Creek" is a story about cultural influences and confluences rather than about psychosexual development, so there is no account of how Cleófilas acquired her capacity for identification. Whatever its origins, Cleófilas's aptitude for identification works counterhegemonically in the way that Benjamin suggests: her global identification with Felice (her laughter is Felice's laughter, her attitudes, at least for the moment, Felice's attitudes) bridges difference and springs Cleófilas free from the coercions of gender discourse as effectively as the identification with La Llorona and the telenovelas' heroines earlier imprisoned her in the position of inarticulately suffering woman.

Sometimes operating discursively, sometimes not, identification is representative of aspects of psychosexual development that have their origins in prelinguistic experience but must nevertheless be included in an account of gender identity acquisition and subversion. Indeed, "Never Marry a
Mexican” implies that one’s orientation to discursive pressures is formed by early psychosexual experience and that if one struggles against one’s imbrication with cultural models of gender without dealing first with one’s identifications within the family, one fails at transformation. Clemencia’s attitude to cultural discourse—in particular, to the story of La Malinche—is conditioned by her identification with her mother, who apparently dealt with conflict by splitting, or polarizing: having trouble with a Mexican husband, she repudiated all Mexicans as a block. When Clemencia similarly repudiates all Mexican men and then rejects her mother, she is operating in a mimetic mode, thinking like her mother. She comes to discourse, and to the figure of La Malinche in particular, already identified with her mother’s negativity, so that repudiation of La Malinche is her only defense. Fixed in the maternal conceptual habit of polarization, she is unable to think dialectically about the extremes of femininity and masculinity represented by the (mythical) Malinche and Cortez, so she can generate only more and more extreme versions (or inversions) of the gender binary she is trying to escape. And despite her conscious rejection of both her blood mother and her cultural mother, she remains identified with their stories: she undertakes the risky sexual liaison with the white man that she deplores in her mother’s life, and she acts out La Malinche’s story, experiencing the betrayal of both her mother and her white lover.

If identification plays a part in constructing a woman’s gender identity, and if identification is as deep and tenacious as it proves to be in Clemencia’s case—and as Alarcón and Moraga claim that identification with La Malinche is for many Chicana and Mexican women—then breaking free of these identifications may involve more than the invention of new speech acts. It may entail “a struggle at the roots of the mind,” as Raymond Williams has said—“not casting off an ideology” (as Clemencia has done), “or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self.”

A character in “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” a third story in Woman Hollering Creek, models such a struggle, thereby demonstrating the cultural and self-exploration that Clemencia’s performance of gender lacks. The story also foregrounds the way that family and culture reflect and repeat a single gender definition, making a daughter’s identification with the social ideal of womanhood seem inescapable. Because the final portion of this story comes close to a personal statement by Cisneros herself—“the last speaker, [Rosario] . . . That’s me”—it can offer a quasi-autobiographical, metafictional commentary on Cisneros’s project in the two stories under consideration. Rosario’s “letter” to the Virgin models a border negotiation with a cultural icon: she goes back and forth between two cultures’ constructions of the ideal woman—Indian and Mexican—and rather than
settling on one side of the border or the other, she brings the two visions of sacred womanhood together in a single sentence.

Rosario has been raging, apparently for years, at the Virgen de Guadalupe for “all that self-sacrifice, all that silent suffering”—for modeling the passive endurance of misery and oppression that she sees reflected in her mother and grandmother (p. 127). Her past warfare with the Virgen resembles Clemencia’s outright repudiation of La Malinche and so makes the negative stand of that story seem like a stage in an ongoing dialectical process. “I wouldn’t let you in my house. . . . Couldn’t look at you without blaming you for all the pain my mother and her mother and all our mothers’ mothers have put up with. . . . I wasn’t going to be my mother or my grandma. . . . Hell no. Not here. Not me” (p. 127). The buildup of negatives, the determination not to “be” the cultural mother (or the blood mother either), the wholesale repudiation of a passive cultural icon, all recall Clemencia’s one-dimensional strategy of rejection. But denial is only a stage; Rosario moves on to consider La Virgen from the standpoint of indigenous Indian culture. She acknowledges the Virgen’s other face—the face of Tonantzin, the powerful Aztec fertility goddess who gives life to the crops and protects her Indian people: “No longer Mary the Mild, but our mother Tonantzin” (p. 128).52 Rosario does not, however, fix on this substitution of Tonantzin for “Mary the Mild”; she evokes the fierce Tonantzin side of the Virgen—the aspect that, because it represents all the Mexican people, Indian as well as Mexican, can rally everyone to fight against oppression—only to read the virtues of Mary the Mild through that vision:

That you could have the power to rally a people when a country was born, and again during civil war, and during a farmworkers’ strike in California made me think maybe there is power in my mother’s patience, strength in my grandmother’s endurance. Because those who suffer have a special power, don’t they? The power of understanding someone else’s pain. (p. 128)

Rosario does not settle on one side of the cultural border, then, not even on the side of power, but returns to read Mary’s (and her own mothers’) capacity for endurance through the strengths of Tonantzin. That encompassing vision, carried on down the page by a kind of triumphant border-crossing list of all Tonantzin’s names—Aztec, Catholic, Mexican, American—enables the speaker to see her mother’s and grandmother’s strength as real and to embrace her own female potential (p. 128). It is the Virgen de Guadalupe’s biculturalism that gives her figure the capacity to empower different modes of being a woman.

This hard-won border dialectic points up by contrast Clemencia’s imprisonment in a single culture’s rigid dichotomy (el chingón versus la
and it dramatizes the cultural labor that Clemencia avoids. It would seem, from the dialogue with the Virgen, that negotiating with and against the symbolic inheritance of Mexican culture involves an examination of how the cultural ideal works, both inside and outside: how the icon of La Virgen or La Malinche functions in the social world to maintain the hierarchy of gender relations; how it functions in the family to enhance and enforce mother-daughter identifications and so ensure the transmission of gender definitions from one generation to the next; and how it works in the internal world to limit and shape one’s impulses and regulate one’s behavior. Rosario follows the direction of her own anger to arrive at discursive analysis: La Virgen de Guadalupe has been used by the patriarchy to make her and women in general “docile and enduring.” Rosario has to reconstruct La Virgen—has to retrieve her face of power, the face of Tonantzin, from her own Indian ancestry—in order to go forward with her life. It would seem that Clemencia has the opportunity to reconstruct Malinche through a similar act of sympathetic imagination: for Malinche, like Clemencia, came to occupy the untenable space between cultures—Indian and Spanish—and was abandoned there by a white lover. But rather than restore the historic dimension to Malinche (as contemporary Chicana revisionists are doing), Clemencia merely acts out against the Malinche of patriarchal tradition. To reject the cultural icon rather than reconstructing it does not work because Mexican cultural icons of womanhood are “part of you,” as Cisneros says in her interview with Aranda: they “live inside you.”

Viewed from the perspective of the collection as a whole, the three stories can be seen as parts of a dialectical process of negotiating with cultural icons that are both inalienable parts of oneself and limitations to one’s potential as a woman. Accepting the ideals of womanhood as they are defined by Mexican culture does not provide a stage for ongoing development, as the example of Cleófilas demonstrates: identifying with La Llorona commits her to the long-suffering endurance of oppression, her powers of self-expression limited to a wail. Clemencia’s strategy of repudiation cannot be a final solution either, because it locks her into a posture opposite to, and therefore defined by, the sexual victimization embodied in La Malinche: as Anzaldúa says, “all reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against.” Rosario describes the stages of her negotiation with the Virgen de Guadalupe as a process that stretches over years and thus makes Cleófilas’s and Clemencia’s positions seem like two stages of an ongoing dialectic. Rosario rejects Guadalupe, re-examines her, embraces her, and finally reconstructs her as a figure that she can understand, live with, and use as a model. To revise the traditional icons is to empower oneself, as Rosario implies in her address to Guadalupe: “When I could see
you in all your facets . . . I could love you, and, finally, learn to love me” (p. 128). Sandra Cisneros—unlike her character Clemencia—sees this reconstruction of the myths and the living identities tied to them as a communal process, shared with other Chicana writers, which she calls, following Alarcón, “‘reinventing ourselves,’ revising ourselves. We accept our culture, but not without adapting [it to] ourselves as women.”

NOTES

More than most articles, this paper was a collaborative project in that each person who read my successive drafts gave me a new perspective on the material, generously contributing his or her ideas to it. My thanks to Rita Cano Alcalá, Lynne Layton, Frances Restuccia, John Swift, and Raul Villa.


3 Anzaldúa, p. 31.


6 Aranda, p. 67.


8 Rita Cano Alcalá pointed out to me the border fluidity that Cisneros attaches to this phrase. As an Anglo woman who necessarily reads Cisneros’s fiction from a standpoint outside Chicana culture, I have tried to supplement my reading by including the words of Chicana writers who have a lived relationship with Mexican icons of womanhood and by consulting Chicana and Chicano professors and students. I am particularly grateful to Rita Alcalá and Raul Villa for sharing their vision of border consciousness with me.

9 Sandra Cisneros, Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 164. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.


11 Anzaldúa, p. 80.

12 Anzaldúa, p. 20.
Interpreting the word “Mexican” is tricky because it has a different valence depending upon whether it is understood as spoken in English or Spanish and depending upon who is saying it to whom. “I am Mexican” can signify a national identity, while “Yo soy mexicano” indicates solidarity with a racial identity. For example, Cisneros speaks of herself as Mexican despite her birth and citizenship in the United States. “We say we’re Mexican in my mother and father’s house. And I like what Anzalduá says: ‘Los Mexicanos.’ She’s talking about a race, not a nationality. . . . We mean the race, la raza. We do not mean what side of the border you are from” (Dasenbrock and Jussawalla, p. 295). Anzalduá says the same: “We say nosotros los mexicanos (by mexicanos we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). . . . Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul” (p. 62). My interpretation of “Mexican” depends on the textual implications of Clemencia’s misreading of the word, both in her mother’s dictum and in Drew’s Anglo discourse.


Paz, pp. 87, 76, 77. Katheryn Rios’s essay, “‘And you know what I have to say isn’t always pleasant’: Translating the Unspoken Word in Cisneros’ Woman Hollering Creek” (unpublished work in progress) points out that Clemencia’s alignment with the characteristics of Paz’s chingón is a revolt against the passive figure of La Malinche. Paz’s Labyrinth of Solitude is indicted by other Chicana feminists for helping to promulgate the myth of La Malinche as sexual traitor; see Alarcón, p. 190; Cypess, p. 11. His description of the gender dynamics of el chingón and la chingada is nonetheless relevant to Clemencia’s sexual rhetoric.
22 Paz, p. 77.
23 Paz, p. 76.
24 Paz, p. 78.
25 “There, there, there” expresses a specifically maternal tenderness, as in the two stories, “Eyes of Zapata” and Bien Pretty,” in Woman Hollering Creek, pp. 86, 154.
26 These forbidden impulses correspond to the attributes of the Virgen de Guadalupe, who “consoles, quiets, dries the tears” (Paz, p. 85) of the Mexican people, her children. The repression of Clemencia’s urge to do the same suggests that she is defining herself not only against the passive, exploited sexuality of La Malinche, but against the “good mother” stereotype of the Virgen de Guadalupe as well. The care she gives to describing herself as entirely malevolent suggests an oppositional posturing in reaction to the social pressure to be saintly, nurturing, and loving like Guadalupe.
28 Clemencia’s relationship to her mother also follows the script of abandonment and betrayal laid down by La Malinche’s mother, who sold her daughter into slavery in order to ensure that her husband’s estate should go to her sons from a second marriage rather than to La Malinche, the rightful heir. Just so, Clemencia’s mother impoverished her own daughter in order to pass her husband’s house down to the sons of her second marriage: “My half brothers living in that house that should’ve been ours, me and [my sister’s]” (p. 73).
29 Anzaldúa, p. 80.
30 Anzaldúa, p. 78.
36 For example, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costillas issued the grito de Dolores as a call to arms at the beginning of the Revolution for Mexican Independence (16 September 1810). See Jane and Kurt Singer, Folk Tales of Mexico (Minneapolis: T. S. Denison, 1969), p. 37.
38 I am indebted to Rita Cano Alcalá for reporting Cisneros’s comment, made
during the "Bridging Borders" conference of MALCS (Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social) in Laredo, Texas, 31 July to 4 August 1991.


40 Butler, p. 141.


43 Butler does make interesting use of Freud's theory of melancholic identification to discuss a stage in early (oedipal) development: the loss of the same-sex parental object of love institutes a melancholic incorporation of that love object, so that "gender identification is a kind of melancholia" (Gender Trouble, p. 63). But her effort in Gender Trouble to make psychoanalysis fit into a Foucauldian discourse/power frame of analysis cuts short such lines of inquiry. As Seyla Benhabib remarks in "Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics: Reflections on the Feminism/Postmodernism Exchange," in Feminist Contentions: "Repeatedly, the path opened by these psychoanalytic reflections on mourning and melancholia as they contribute to the formation of gender identity is closed off by the trope of the ‘discursive/linguistic critique,’ borrowed from Foucault" (p. 120). In an article published while this essay was in press, "Melancholy Gender—Refused Identification," in Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 5, No. 2 (1995), 165-180, Butler extends the argument that melancholy identification is the basis of gender identity. The foreclosure of mourning for the lost same-sex object that in early development leads to an incorporation of the object into the ego becomes a cultural habit, accounting for the dearth of social mechanisms for mourning gay men lost to AIDS.


48 Butler, in emphasizing the linguistic production of gender, overlooks some family practices that also contribute to gender construction, such as those Benhabib lists in her critique of Gender Trouble, notably the parent-child dynamics that precede language acquisition "through which the human infant, a vulnerable and dependent body, becomes a distinct self with the ability to speak its language"

49 A conversation with Lynne Layton inspired this line of thought.


51 Dasenbrock and Jussawalla, p. 292.

52 The Virgen de Guadalupe is considered one with Tonantzin, the Aztec fertility goddess, because she appeared to Juan Diego, a poor Indian, at the site where Tonantzin’s temple once stood (on Tepeyac Hill) in 1531. Speaking Nahua (the language of the Aztecs) she ordered him to persuade the Catholic Bishop to build a shrine to her on Tepeyac Hill. She thus combines in her person the diverse cultural streams of the Mexican people. As Anzaldúa says, she “is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche . . . she is the symbol of the mestizo true to his or her Indian values” (p. 30). See also Ena Campbell, “The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Female Self-Image: A Mexican Case History,” in Mother Worship: Theme and Variations (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 12–13.

53 Anzaldúa, p. 31.

54 See note 18.

55 Aranda, p. 67.

56 Anzaldúa, p. 78.

57 Aranda, p. 66.