

Chicana writers: recovering a female Mexican legacy

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*You insult me
When you say I'm
Schizophrenic
My divisions are
Infinite¹*

The vision articulated in this quote by the Chicana poet Bernice Zamora is related to the position adopted by many Chicana writers who seek to underscore difference and multiplicity *vis à vis* their identity as a minority group in the United States.

The issues I would like to raise here are related to the Mexican heritage adopted by Chicana writers (particularly from the eighties on) in order to establish, assert and reframe their cultural roots. This they do by upholding their difference versus the dominant Anglo-American culture and by exploring their Mexicanness — as women — not only by recovering their heritage but by transforming and recreating it as well. It is by means of their acts of resistance and creativity through the written word that their singularity and specificity as Chicanas is established, a process that also entails the creation of models for future generations.

The question here in approaching the Mexican-rooted heritage of Chicana writers is not so much whether there is, in fact, such a thing as a homogeneous, monolithic Mexican cultural identity — a huge question of utmost complexity that begs to be asked, but which is beyond the

¹ Bernice Zamora, quoted as an epigraph to "Introduction" in Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero (eds.), *Infinite Divisions. An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1993, p. 1.

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Yolanda M. López, *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*.

scope of the present essay— but, rather, what are the choices involved as regards those Mexican elements adopted for a Chicana identity-building process and what the outcome is, from a specifically Mexican perspective.

“The difference,” as the renowned Chicana writer Ana Castillo has stated, “is not in the telling, but in *who* does the telling” [my emphasis].² And it is within this difference that the subject-as-woman-as-Chicana is articulated by inserting and creating specific markers that may distinguish their literature from that of Mexican and/or American women writers.

The “Mexicanness” Chicanas have adopted in their process of identity-creation is closely related to their class origins and is rooted in Mexican customs and traditions, many of them female-oriented, and at least part of them related to everyday rituals of survival —such as cooking, cleaning, clothes-washing, child-care, single-parenting and work outside the home. This identity-creation is closely related to their resistance to a patriarchal-macho Mexican legacy in matters of religion and sexuality, story-telling traditions, and a variety of myths and legends peopled by mythical figures, both female and male.

Although it is true that Chicana writers are concerned with writing as a testimonial act, whereby they may explore their difference in terms of race, class and gender, by naming the unnamed, narrating the unnarrated, all of which is in itself subversive, their subversion goes beyond these borders. As literary critic

² Ana Castillo, “Massacre of the Dreamers” in Philomena Mariani (ed.), *Critical Fictions. The Politics of Imaginative Writing*, Seattle, Bay Press, 1991, p. 166.



Gerardo Suter, *A Nocturnal Visitor*.

Debra Castillo points out, “since there is no syntax, no lexicon outside of language, women writers must refine such tools as they are given, transforming vocabularies and focusing attention on particular usages so as to achieve a greater working knowledge of the byways of cultural production.”³ And it is in terms of the Chicanas’ generically positioned difference that their own “byways of cultural production” become all the more subversive, since they adopt, appropriate, explore, question, remythify and recreate at will certain Mexican elements of their choice.

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Because Chicanas, as other women writers, have adopted what Argentine writer Silvia Molloy has referred to as “una nueva práctica, [o sea] subvertir el lenguaje autoritario que las pone ‘en su lugar’ desubicándose con lo que Ludmer llama ‘las tretas del débil’” (a new praxis of writing [which is to say] subverting the authoritarian language that puts them “in their place,” [by] displacing themselves with what Ludmer calls “the tricks of the weak”),⁴ their displacement enables them to relocate themselves as they seek ways to express and create those “byways of cultural production.”

A nurturing and creative heritage

One of the major Mexican components of Chicana identity is rooted in a literal and metaphorical nurturing process traditionally placed in the hands of women and located in the home, where Mexican customs, the Spanish language, everyday rituals of survival and the importance of family

³ Debra Castillo, *Talking Back. Towards a Latin American Feminist Criticism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1992, p. 65.

⁴ “Entrevista con Silvia Molloy” in Magdalena García Pinto (ed.), *Historias íntimas. Conversaciones con diez escritoras latinoamericanas*, Hanover, N.H., Ediciones del Norte, 1988, p. 147.

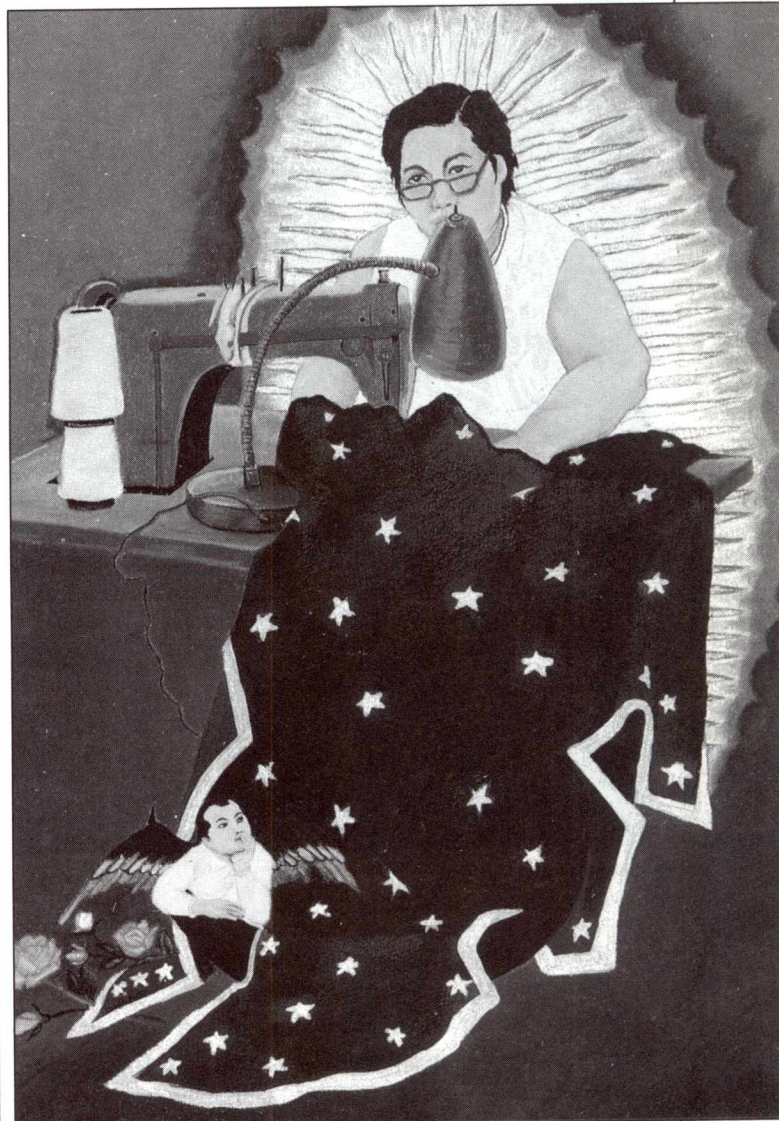
bonding are learned and instilled, where the gusto for food is acquired and its importance experienced first-hand.

Whereas this home-bound role assigned to Chicana women would seem to locate them in a constricted space (literally and metaphorically), Chicana writers perform a displacement act by restoring and legitimizing this nurturing role within that same space. In an essay entitled "Nopalitos. A Testimonio," Helena María Viramontes seeks to recover the undervalued creativity of her illiterate mother who was able to feed—and nurture—a family of eleven with *nopalitos* or prickly-pear leaves grown in her garden and served in a variety of dishes, by creating a parallel between her mother's creative-inventive act and her own act of writing.⁵ This means of legitimizing women's unacknowledged and diminished daily home-labor—which is reminiscent of Alice Walker's own effort to do the same in relation to Afro-American women in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens"⁶—establishes a Mexican-rooted legacy which she transforms as a Chicana writer, even as she also creates a specifically Chicana legacy for future generations.

Moreover, great importance is given to food and food-making of Mexican origins, such as tamales, chile-sauce, beans, tortillas, and so on. Tortillas, the Mexican staple food, cease to be mere food-for-the masses to become quasi-symbolic of a female-related nurturing object. Indeed, Viramontes compares her mother's daily tortilla-making ritual, entailing early rising, skill and patience, that pat-patting and shaping to a perfect roundness, to the writer's own fiction-making process,⁷ to her use of language that, as Paul Lauter has stated, "forever plays against the edges of meaning."⁸

Female bonding and the subtle subversions of chile-sauce making

The traditional role of Mexican females as home-bound is a role learned early on by children and adolescents—who, it should be added parenthetically, abound in Chicana literature, particularly within the context of a variety of rites of passage. This role is often depicted in Chicana



Yolanda M. López, Margaret F. Stewart: *Our Lady of Guadalupe*.

literature as a nurturing process, particularly when it is a mother or abuelita (grandmother) who presides over the cooking/nurturing rituals, those rituals of everyday survival.

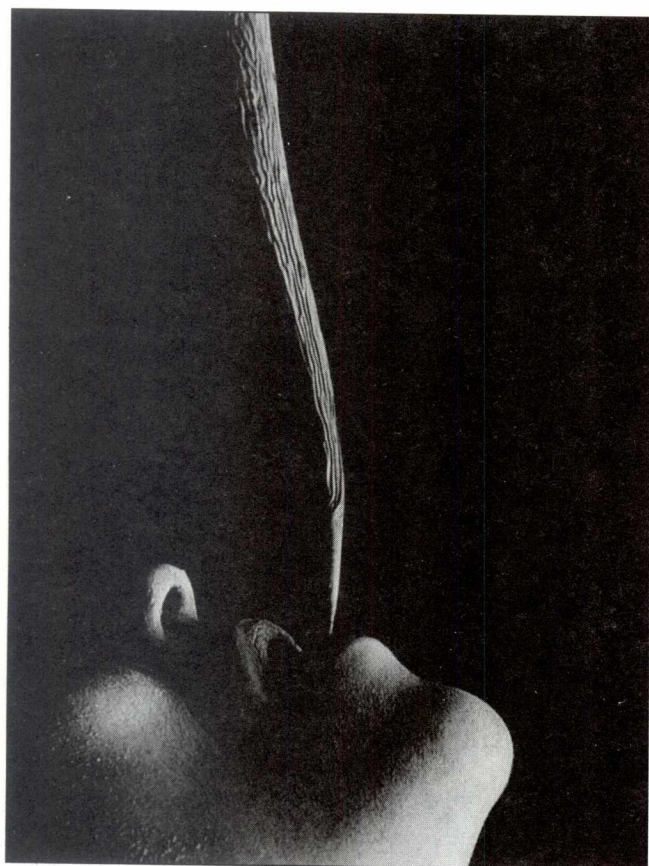
It is by using these two figures that the displacement act performed by Chicana writers relocates these rituals and gives them new meaning(s). For example: in the short story "The Moths" by Helena María Viramontes, the female adolescent protagonist-narrator who flees the Father's Word embodied in an order to attend Catholic mass to cleanse her supposed sins—an order backed by her mother and sisters—seeks sanctuary in her abuelita's home and finds release in a chile-crushing ritual—in which the relation chile-phallus is suggested since in Mexico a penis is also popularly alluded to as a chile.

⁵ See Helena María Viramontes, "Nopalitos. A Testimonio," in Asunción Horno Delgado (ed.), *Breaking Boundaries: Latin Writing and Critical Readings*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1989.

⁶ See Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp. 231-243.

⁷ See Viramontes, *ibid.*

⁸ Paul Lauter, in A. La Vonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (eds.), "The Literatures of America: A Comparative Discipline," *Redefining American Literary History*, New York, The Modern Language Association of America, 1990, p. 24.

Gerardo Suter, *Song*.

As she crushes the chiles, sprinkling baptismal tears on them and releasing her contained rage in a purging act (counteracting the father's command to "confess" her sins to a Catholic priest), female bonding with the tradition-bound abuelita figure is reaffirmed within the space created by the food-making ritual: "Abuelita lifted the burnt chiles from the fire and sprinkled water on them until the skins began to separate. Placing them in front of me, she turned to check the menudo. I peeled the skins off and put the flimsy, limp looking green and yellow chiles in the *molcajete* and began to crush and crush and twist and crush the heart out of the tomato, the clove of garlic, the stupid chiles that made me cry, crushed them until they turned into liquid under my bull hand. With a wooden spoon, I scraped hard to destroy the guilt, and my tears were gone."⁹

By performing a traditional female ritual that would seem to keep women in their place (i.e., in the kitchen/home) according to a patriarchal—and a Mexican-macho—cultural legacy, the ritual's significance is displaced,

⁹ Helena María Viramontes, "The Moths," in *The Moths and Other Stories*, Arte Público Press, Houston, 1985, p. 26.

subversively transforming it into a creative act of self-nurturing rooted in a Mexican heritage, thereby recreating a ritual with specific Chicana markers: "Abuelita touched my hand and pointed to the bowl of menudo that steamed in front of me. I spooned some chile into the menudo and rolled a corn tortilla thin with the palms of my hands."¹⁰

Her food-oriented creative efforts are thereby joined to those of her abuelita. The presumed later ingestion of the sauce she has prepared and which is now blended into the menudo suggests, moreover, a new/home-made ritual only once removed from the ingestion of the Christ-body/host during Catholic rituals.

The abuelita figure as symbolic past and the rebirthing of ancient Mexican rituals

The abuelita or grandmother figure becomes a primary model figure for Chicanas: the symbolic bearer of a purer Mexican tradition, and a representative of family-bonding and a matriarchal legacy of wise female elders. She becomes a quasi-mythical bridge between the Mexican

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legacy and the new Chicana/o generations, particularly since the mother figure, who, although often depicted with nurturing qualities, is seen by many Chicana writers in highly conflictive terms, since she is often an intermediary figure, more "assimilated" in many ways to the dominant culture, who often fails to side with her daughter against the male figure of the father/husband.

Because the abuelita figure is related to a mythical Mexican past, she is related to long-standing customs and traditions. In "The Moths" by Viramontes, she is related to ancient rituals that hark back, in fact, to pre-Hispanic times, rituals which are not merely recovered but re-invented within a creative female-centered process of the "byways of cultural production." Moreover, by doing so, Viramontes is tapping into the spiritual wealth offered by these ancient

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

myths as a means of filling in the void left by the need to resist a patriarchally-centered Catholicism, and as a means of recreating alternative meaningful rituals inserted within a contemporary Chicana context.

The unnamed narrator-protagonist's reaction to her abuelita's death later on in this short story is to instinctively perform a ritual in pre-Hispanic traditions, whereby the dead were prepared for their next life. After cleansing the corpse and gently placing it in the uterus-like water-filled tub, she undresses and enters the tub herself, thereby re-inventing a female-bonding and mourning ritual in which the girl rocks her abuelita and herself into comfort and does so in the name of the woes suffered by generations of women facing loss: "... and for the first time in a long time I cried, rocking us, crying for her, for me, for Amá, the sobs emerging from the depths of anguish, the misery of feeling half born, sobbing until finally the sobs rippled into circles and circles of sadness and relief. There, there, I said to Abuelita, rocking us gently, there, there."¹¹

A pre-Hispanic myth is recovered here too, since the adolescent is witness to a host of moths emerging from the abuelita's mouth which, while she was alive, remained silent/silenced —except as a vehicle for the perpetuation of an oral story-telling tradition which the granddaughter carries on by narrating the story of "The Moths." At the moment of her death, however, the abuelita emits symbolic utterances —of a pictorial-representative nature, in accordance with the tradition depicted in pre-Hispanic codices— of an equally symbolic past which is in danger of being lost to the new generations of Chicanas/os, a past represented by the moths, a version of the *papalotl*, the Aztec butterfly symbol of the soul, now free, fluttering towards the light: "Then the moths came. Small, gray ones that came from her soul and out through her mouth fluttering to light, circling the single dull light bulb of the bathroom"; and, "I wanted to rest my head on her chest with her stroking my hair, telling me about the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up..."¹²

The new generation's fear of losing ancient rituals and traditions is manifested in its need to inherit the abuelita's healing, nurturing and plant-growing gifts lest these be lost to future generations, and in its urge to recreate and reinvent past rituals, perpetuating them and relocating them in the present everyday Chicana reality. In "The Moths," part of the adolescent's death-fantasy surrounding her abuelita is expressed by allaying these fears of loss through

the very act of story-telling —in which the narrator and Viramontes herself are immersed— an act which relates the abuelita's nurturing possibilities to the heavens: "Dying is lonely and I wanted to go to where the moths were, stay with her [abuelita] and plant chayotes whose vines would crawl up her fingers and into the clouds..."¹³

Reconstructing traditional Mexican religious, legendary and historical female figures

As Alice Walker has said: "The absence of models, in literature as in life, is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of

¹³ *Ibid.*



Yolanda M. López, Victoria F. Franco: *Our Lady of Guadalupe.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹² *Ibid.*

spirit and intellect... enrich and enlarge one's view of existence."¹⁴ And, I would add, create a legacy for future generations—in this case of Chicanas.

In addition to the abuelita figure, other female figures are also recovered and recreated by Chicana writers. In the process of creating female-centered "byways of cultural production," the displacement act becomes vital, since most female figures are set within a patriarchal-macho context that has given them a set of preestablished values. Values subverted by displacing, relocating, redefining and recreating them.

The three recurrently recreated figures are the Virgin of Guadalupe, Malintzin or la Malinche, and la Llorona, all of whom recent Chicano, Mexican and American revisionist research has done much to reassess by tracing and repositioning their historical and mythical status, that has given them their present place in Mexican culture.

These three figures reappear again and again, in a wide range of manifestations, throughout Chicana literature, and have gradually come to create an inter-referential body of work that will serve for future generations.

Reinventing a historical female figure

Despite the prevalence of the above-mentioned figures, there are other less well-known female figures. The one I wish to mention here, particularly since it is closely related to Mexican history, is an obscure historical female figure who has been recovered from what we could call the silences of history.

This figure, who appears in the short story "Eyes of Zapata" by Sandra Cisneros, is Inés Alfaro, Emiliano Zapata's lover and bearer of his firstborn son, who is barely mentioned in historical accounts.¹⁵ Inés is not only absent from historiographical discourse, but she is a multiply stigmatized figure: branded by race, class and gender, with no claim to the legitimate title of Zapata's wife, she is also a *nahual*, a witch-like figure who, as she clairvoyantly foresees, bears a line of women who sell herbs in Mexico City's marketplace, La Merced. By hailing her witch-stigma as a banner of difference and specificity, she is able to displace and reposition herself: "If I am a witch, then so be

it.... And [I] took to eating black things —*huitlacoche* the corn mushroom, coffee, dark chiles, the bruised part of fruit, the darkest things to make me hard and strong."¹⁶ Moreover, Inés' own story inserts Zapata as a mere character rather than as a hero-protagonist, thereby displacing him, through fiction, from his mythical posture.¹⁷

Although she is a Mexican figure, Mexican historians, including feminist-oriented ones, have not sought to recover her. Cisneros' selection of this figure, rather than other well-known women of the Mexican Revolution, from the silences of history through fiction—since that is what this character is: mere fiction outside the realm of historiographical discourse—serves to underscore her

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specificity as a figure rescued for Chicana purposes. Because she has been relegated to the silences outside the boundaries of the Mexican cultural patriarchal heritage, she can be displaced, relocated and, of course, reinvented.

This "new" female historical figure functions as a specific Chicana female empowering model rooted in a Mexican legacy that has culturally and historically relegated her to the margins and silence, but has now been relocated by a Chicana writer (Sandra Cisneros), thereby positioning her as a model for future Chicana generations. Moreover, by emerging as a female counterpart to the revolutionary figure of Zapata rescued by male Chicano literature that inserts him within the context of the Chicano Movement, the figure of Inés is recovered from the silences of the history of the Chicano Movement itself, giving those women participating in it a voice as well as a historical and a very different "heroic" figure of their own, thereby creating specifically Chicana "byways of cultural production." ❧

¹⁴ Alice Walker, "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life" in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens. Womanist Prose*, New York, Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1983, p. 4.

¹⁵ See Mario Gill, "El gran reportaje histórico; Zapata: su pueblo y sus hijos" in *Historia mexicana*, vol. 2, n° 2 (6), October-December 1952, pp. 307-8. Also see Enrique Krauze, *Emiliano Zapata. El amor a la tierra*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987. In John Womack Jr.'s classic *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1972, he only mentions her as "another woman", p. 155.

¹⁶ Sandra Cisneros, "Eyes of Zapata" in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, New York, Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1992, p. 106.

¹⁷ For a broader discussion of this approach to Cisneros' story see Claire Joysmith, "Desplazamiento y (re)construcción: "Eyes of Zapata" de Sandra Cisneros" in *Las formas de nuestras voces: Chicana and Mexicana Writers in Mexico*, CISAN/UNAM/Third-Woman Press, Mexico (forthcoming).