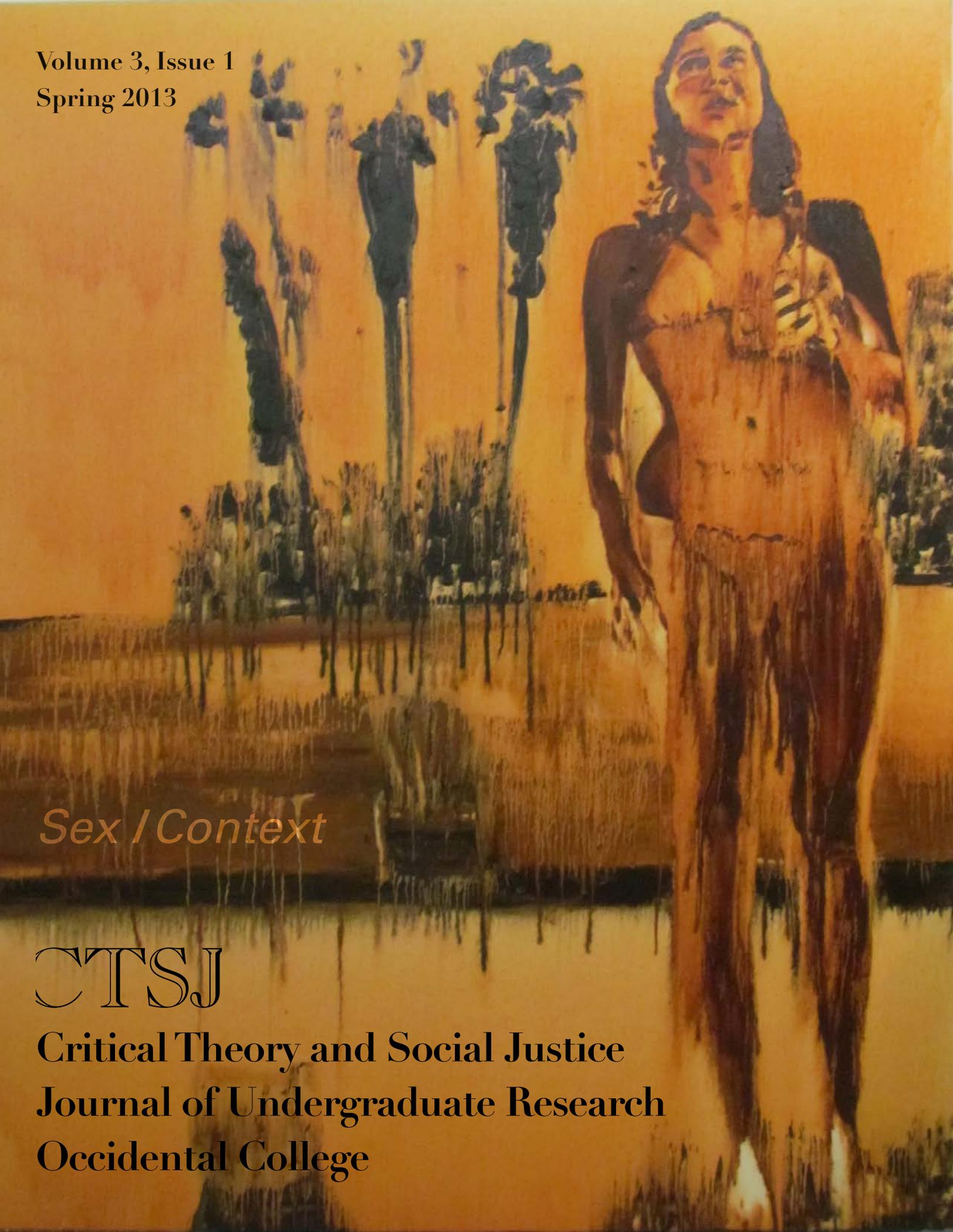


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Resisting Containment: Relocating Subjectivity in Sandra Cisneros's "One Holy Night"

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Abstract: Sandra Cisneros's short story "One Holy Night" from her celebrated collection Woman Hollering Creek has been generally ignored by critics. This essay argues that this scholarly neglect is due in part to the story's troubling challenge to theories of agency for Chicana women. "One Holy Night" interrogates our normative ideas of childhood innocence and sexuality, as well as presenting a child narrator who retains a powerful agency throughout a particularly violent story. Additionally, it resists containment to a space of difference assigned to women-of-color writers. This essay suggests that Cisneros's staged impasse might be understood as an example of Gloria Anzaldúa's "Coatlicue state," a violent feminist process of becoming that belies a politics of personal agency hinging on positive sites of identification.

Keywords: Sandra Cisneros, Coatlicue state, Chicana literature, third world feminism, childhood sexuality, Gloria Anzaldua, Mestiza, Woman Hollering Creek



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Cisneros and the Three Mothers

That which is different, fragmented, imagined, non-linear, non-teleological, has no place in the stories we construct about Chicanas.

—Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*¹

Sandra Cisneros is one of the most recognized and anthologized contemporary Chicana authors. Her first book, *The House on Mango Street*, published in 1984, illustrates the life of a young girl growing up in a Chicano neighborhood of Chicago, and it continues to be her most famous book.² It sold more than 4 million copies and has become required reading in both secondary schools and universities across the United States. Her second book, *Woman Hollering Creek*, is a collection of short stories and is similarly acclaimed.³ Writers and literary critics continue to add to the vast body of literature surrounding her stories of borderland existences, which range within *Woman Hollering Creek* from the point of view of a young child to the voices of adult women. Her collection is often described as a dynamic portrayal of Chicana protagonists struggling to empower themselves. As one critic notes, *Woman Hollering Creek* portrays “strong resilient women living life to the fullest ... reflecting the rhythms of Mexican and Mexican-American women grappling with racism and patriarchy.”⁴

In contrast to this vein of criticism, I read “One Holy Night,” one of the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek*, as evidence that her writing can, in fact, challenge the surface-level empowerment narratives many feel comfortable locating in her work. “One Holy Night” has

1 Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999) xiv.

2 Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1984).

3 Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1991).

4 Michelle M. Tokarczyk, *Class Definitions: On the Lives and Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, and Dorothy Allison* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna Univ. Press, 2008) 128.



been strikingly disregarded in literary criticism. I argue that this circumvention stems from the story's challenging nature. The story interrogates our normative ideas of childhood innocence and sexuality, as well as presenting a child narrator who retains a powerful agency throughout a particularly violent narrative. Additionally, the story resists containment to a space of difference assigned to women-of-color writers; thus, the literary praxis normally employed in discussing Cisneros as a Chicana writer becomes an impossibility.

In this paper, after rejecting the critical perspective through which Cisneros's works are usually examined, I apply Gloria Anzaldúa's "Coatlicue State," an essential aspect in the development of her New Mestiza Consciousness in *Borderlands/La Frontera*,⁵ to "One Holy Night." In so doing, I demonstrate this story's resistance and the narrator's unique self-transformation, which enacts neither empowerment nor victimization.

I first examine the lens through which Cisneros's work is usually interpreted to illustrate how "One Holy Night" falls outside of this framework. Cisneros's critics largely focus on her reinterpretation and manipulation of the stories of the three major Chicana cultural archetypes: La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona. According to Chicana feminist tradition, social expectations of gender crystallize around and find their source in these icons. As internalized maternal figures, these archetypes haunt and confine the sexual identities of contemporary Chicana women, even as each of these figures is inexorably tied to the others.⁶ Although the colonizers rechristened her with a Spanish name, La Virgen de Guadalupe originated from the precolonial Aztec fertility goddess *Coatlalopeuh*, (pronounced similarly to the Spanish *Guadalupe*). In their attempt to impose Catholicism on the indigenous people, the Spanish used Aztec religion to create a figure synonymous with the Virgin Mary. Gloria Anzaldúa names Guadalupe the single most important political and cultural image of Mexican and Chicano people. She explains that the sexuality of Coatlalopeuh was taken out of Guadalupe, rendering her the chaste, protective mother.⁷ La Virgen de Guadalupe thus operates as a

5 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 2007).

6 Jean Wyatt, "On Not Being La Malinche: Border Negotiations of Gender in Sandra Cisneros's 'Never Marry a Mexican' and 'Woman Hollering Creek,'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 14.2 (1995): 244.

7 Gloria Anzaldúa, "Coatlalopeuh: She Who Has Dominion over Serpents," *Goddess of the Americas*, ed. Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997) 53.



synthesis of the pre- and postcolonial, both a mediator between and a symbol for Spanish and indigenous components of Chicano identity.

La Malinche, also a mediator, is the quintessential whore in the deeply culturally embedded virgin/whore dichotomy. She is the legendary traitorous indigenous woman, originally named Malintzin Tenepal, who was sold into slavery and given to Hernán Cortés as his mistress and translator. With Cortés, she allegedly bore the first *mestizaje*, or person of mixed Spanish and indigenous blood, thus becoming the original mother of all *mestizos* and the opposing Mexican/Chicano maternal figure to the desexualized Guadalupe.

Accused of revealing secrets of the Aztec resistance to Cortés, La Malinche bears the blame of the entire conquest through her sexual complicity. She embodies the paradox of a guilty, violated sexuality. Her nickname *La Chingada*—literally “the fucked one”—implies her victimization, yet she retains enough control over her sexuality to be blamed for its consequences. Though she was exalted and revered as a heroine by Spanish chroniclers at the time of the conquest, after the nationalism that accompanied the Mexican Revolution in the early-twentieth century, she became damned as *La Chingada*.⁸ The current Spanish term *malinchista* refers to anyone who adopts the traditions of another culture, a traitor to his or her own race. Guadalupe and La Malinche comprise the essential binary pair. La Malinche has become what Chicana feminist writer Norma Alarcón describes as “Guadalupe’s monstrous double.”⁹

La Llorona is the least defined of the three archetypes. She is found mostly in Mexican and Chicano folklore as a woman who wanders near bodies of water at night in a white dress, crying for the loss of her children, though in many versions she has drowned and killed them herself. Similar to La Malinche, she embodies maternal betrayal and both have been largely seen as destructive figures. Many contemporary Chicana writers such as Cisneros, however, have reclaimed and retold the stories of all three women. For example, Anzaldúa characterizes the three figures as “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 and is a combination of the other two.”¹⁰ La Llorona also functions for

8 Pérez xv.

9 Norma Alarcón, “Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism,” *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, eds. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994) 111.

10 Anzaldúa, “Coatlalopeuh,” 54.

Anzaldúa as her “symbol for *la herida de* [the wound of] colonialism and the trauma of the conquest.”¹¹ Her wailing is associated for Anzaldúa with grief for the wounded indigenous people.

Cisneros’s most popular and widely discussed stories from her *Woman Hollering Creek* collection are not coincidentally two stories that explicitly reference La Malinche and La Llorona. “Never Marry a Mexican” and her title story “Woman Hollering Creek” are both described as Cisneros’s feminist reinterpretation and empowerment of the two figures. “Never Marry a Mexican” depicts the affair between a Chicana narrator and a white man named Drew, who calls her “my Malinche, my courtesan” during sex because he “looked like a Cortez with that beard of [his].”¹² He leaves her to marry a white woman, and she eventually finds revenge by sleeping with their son, avenging herself through her sexuality. “Woman Hollering Creek,” a direct reference to La Llorona, is Cisneros’s most accessible borderlands story, as the protagonist literally crosses the United States–Mexico border and describes her life on either side. After marrying an abusive Mexican-American man and having his children, she aligns herself with La Llorona, wondering if an oppressive life such as her own could drive a woman to kill her own children. At the end of the story, she escapes her married life by crossing over a creek called “La Gritona” or “The Hollering Woman.” This story is easily read as a “Chicana feminist transformation of the powerless waiting woman.”¹³

Trinh Minh-Ha, in her discussion of “the triple bind” of women-of-color writers, offers an explanation for why these stories in Cisneros’s collection are particularly favored.¹⁴ According to Minh-Ha, she who is a nonwhite, third-world person, a woman, and a writer is forced to expose her work to the praise and criticism of those who either entirely disregard or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes.¹⁵ Furthermore, she argues that the “growing ethnic-feminist consciousness has made it increasingly difficult to ignore the specification of the writer as historical subject, and writing as a practice located at the intersection of subject

11 AnaLouise Keating, *Entre Mundos Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 55.

12 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 74.

13 Sonia Saldívar-Hull, “Introduction,” *La Frontera/Borderlands*, 2nd ed., by Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 2007) 7.

14 Trinh Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989).

15 Minh-Ha 6.

and history.”¹⁶ Almost all the literature I have found on Cisneros’s work, before discussing her stories, focuses considerable attention on her life as a working-class Chicana woman and how her experiences have influenced her writing. In line with Minh-Ha’s argument, Cisneros is introduced and addressed foremost, not as a renowned fiction writer, but as a Chicana woman who writes. As a result of the overemphasis on her “difference,” the three cultural archetypes are immediately inscribed onto her work and onto Cisneros herself as a writer.

In her book *Class Definitions*, Michelle Tokarczyk opens the chapter on Cisneros with an “Early Background” section followed by “The Legacy of La Malinche.” The latter section begins with a description of Cisneros’s decision to end a relationship with a controlling boyfriend in college. Before introducing the story of La Malinche, Tokarczyk writes that Cisneros did not want to be like “the good respectable women trapped in relationships with possessive men.”¹⁷ With this critical juxtaposition, Tokarczyk moves beyond a focus on the figure’s presence in her work and equates Cisneros herself with the contemporary reclaimed and empowered La Malinche.

Manifesting Minh-Ha’s complaint, Tokarczyk demonstrates how the desire to examine Cisneros’s work through the lens of her ethnicity can easily expose our longing to briefly sample the exoticism of another culture. One particularly explicit example is a review of *Woman Hollering Creek* from a Houston newspaper entitled “Taste Deeply of Hispanic Culture with Sandra Cisneros as Guide.”¹⁸ The first line of the review reads, “Sandra Cisneros is indeed a woman hollering,” explicitly conflating Cisneros with La Llorona. The reviewer writes that the collection of stories “offers a gift to the uninitiated, the chance to taste deeply of Hispanic culture while accompanied by a knowing and generous guide.” According to this reviewer, readers are actually tourists on vacation in “Hispanic culture” with Cisneros’s stories as a route of access. Cisneros has become our guide, the essential expert on the Other who exposes the reader to its secrets. In this sense, Cisneros is also converted into our own La Malinche, translating the Chicana woman’s experience for the purpose of our understanding and consumption of cultural difference. In both academic criticism and popular reception, Cisneros cannot escape conflation with Chicana cultural figures.

16 Minh-Ha 6.

17 Tokarczyk 102.

18 Elise Gunst, “Taste Deeply of Hispanic Culture with Sandra Cisneros as Guide,” *Houston Chronicle* 5 May 1991: 23.



The story “One Holy Night” resists containment as an excursion into otherness, simultaneously complicating and challenging the space of difference critics tend to assign to Cisneros. I posit that instead of engaging with these three expected feminine archetypes, Cisneros manifests Anzaldúa’s reclaimed precolonial goddess Coatlicue in the story, a theory I will turn to at length at the end of this article after reviewing the story and major trends in Cisneros criticism.

“One Holy Night” is narrated by a young girl who introduces the story as a confessional explanation of her relationship with a man named Chaq: “It’s been eighteen weeks since Abuelita chased him away with the broom, and what I’m telling you I never told nobody, except for Rachel and Lourdes, who know everything. He said he would love me like a revolution, like a religion.”¹⁹ The reader knows from the very beginning that her story takes place in the United States, but she narrates in the present from Mexico, where she has been banished as a result of what transpired between them. She explains that they met when he bought fruit from the pushcart where she worked and that she knew soon after they met that she loved him. She makes a clear distinction between the way she saw him and the mysterious figure her community saw. “Maybe you wouldn’t like him. To you he might be a bum. Maybe... What I knew of Chaq was only what he told me, because nobody seemed to know where he came from.”²⁰ He tells her only his name, Chaq Uxmal Paloquín, and that his indigenous bloodline makes him a direct descendant of Mayan kings.

They have sex, and though she tries to hide what has happened, her grandmother finds out from gossiping neighbors. Chaq leaves town only weeks before she realizes she is pregnant. She describes how she cried over losing him as her grandmother searched for clues to his identity. Eventually, through letters from his sister, the narrator and her grandmother find out he lied about his identity. At this point, she breaks from recounting past events and returns to the present tense, as if confronting the truth herself while simultaneously revealing it to the reader. “Boy Baby [her name for Chaq] is thirty-seven years old. His name is Chato which means fat-face. There is no Mayan blood.”²¹ Soon after this realization, his sister sends a newspaper clipping describing his arrest and the discovery of eleven female bodies in a cave, murdered

19 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 27.

20 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 29.

21 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 33.



over the last seven years. The narrator then struggles to reconcile Chaq's true identity with the man she loves. The story ends with the narrator declaring the names of the children she plans to have, culminating in her own explanation and definition of love.

In an article about *Woman Hollering Creek*, Harryette Mullen makes use of almost every story in the collection to support her argument that Cisneros's text often references the violence of inadequacy of translation and interpretation. She places Cisneros in the context of other "Chicano, Latino, and minority writers ... in their roles as translators and interpreters of minority experience."²² Here, Mullen directly invokes the most famous translator, La Malinche. (Cortés actually referred to Malintzin as "*La lengua*"—"the tongue"—a metaphor for her services as translator.²³) Mullen's only mention of "One Holy Night" is to reference Chaq Uxmal Paloquín as an example of the beauty of the Spanish language's untranslatability into English. She writes that Chaq's "masculine beauty, like the poetry of the Spanish language, is simply unreadable to anyone using a dominant Aryan standard of beauty."²⁴

This reading fails to take into account several layers of interface beyond the linguistic translation of Spanish to English. Firstly, Chaq's beauty should not recall "the poetry of the Spanish language" because his name and character strongly claim to be a constructed indigenous identity. This is evident in the narrator's account.

What I knew of Chaq was only what he told me, because no one seemed to know where he came from. Only that he could speak a language that no one could understand, said his name translated into Boy, or boy-child, and so it was the street people nicknamed him Boy Baby ... Boy Baby brushes my hair and talks to me in his strange language because I like to hear it. When I like to hear him tell me is how he is Chaq, Chaq of the people of the sun, Chaq of the temples, and what he says sounds sometimes like broken clay, and other times like hollow sticks, or like the swish of old feathers crumbling into dust.²⁵

Chaq arguably embodies an indigenously inflected Mexican nationalist anger by taking on the violence of colonization through tropes of wounded land: "he wept for a thousand years" with

22 Harryette Mullen, "'A Silence Between Us Like a Language': The Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*," *MELUS* 21.2 (1996): 4.

23 For more on the figure of La Malinche as translator, see Alarcón, "Traddutora, Traditora."

24 Mullen 4.

25 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 29.

the “sadness of stone.”²⁶ This is also apparent when the narrator describes his voice as like “broken clay” and “old feathers crumbling into dust.” His voice seemingly narrates the fall of “the grandeur of the people and the ancient ways,” which Chaq claims a future son will take back from the colonizers or “those who have pushed the ancient stones off their pedestals.”²⁷ Yet once we recognize that this persona is entirely fabricated, I would argue that in this story his beauty functions more as the violent colonial translation of a romanticized, vague indigenous past. This self-nomination of Chaq Uxmal Paloquín and his improvisation of primal language foreshadow not only the significance of his deception but also the narrator’s seduction through her collusion in fetishizing an indigenous past.

Mullen’s evasion of the main character in the story likewise challenges her reading of femininity in Cisneros. The narrator describes the consequences of her infatuation with Chaq as “taking the crooked walk.” Mullen names various characters from different stories as evidence for her claim that *Woman Hollering Creek* offers stories of women who are “the way-ward and wandering ones, whose names are mentioned in gossip”²⁸ and who attempt to escape the narrow constraints that define women’s experience. Mullen, however, avoids any mention of the protagonist from “One Holy Night,” even though the narrator is a character who “wanders” from what is expected of her in the most radical of ways, particularly in her refusal to feel shame for her actions.

In general, Cisneros’s critics are particularly concerned with characters who exhibit varying means of resisting prescribed feminine roles, which explains why revisions of the three cultural icons, Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona, are consistently favored in discussing Cisneros. Jean Wyatt, who has written extensively on *Woman Hollering Creek*, discusses one character who “rejects Guadalupe, re-examines her, embraces her, and finally reconstructs her... To revise the traditional icons is to empower oneself.”²⁹ Self-empowerment is an appealing motif in Cisneros’s text, but “One Holy Night” certainly does not fit into the typical definition of an empowerment narrative. In this story, Cisneros avoids both empowerment and victimization of her narrator, offering a story that is aware of its own difficulty.

26 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 30.

27 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 29.

28 Mullen 7-8.

29 Wyatt 266.



In her book *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Emma Pérez cites postcolonial scholar Chéla Sandoval's theory of differential consciousness as instrumental in her work to uncover Chicana histories. Sandoval uses differential consciousness, a new subjectivity developed under multiple conditions of oppression, to critique hegemonic feminism that assimilates third-world feminism into a universal feminist theory. Thus, third-world feminist voices vanish into a specific third space that only third-world women occupy.³⁰ Similarly, Pérez posits her decolonial imaginary in Chicana history as a tool to recover Chicana voices whose agency is only enacted in that third space.³¹ The overwhelming disregard of "One Holy Night," despite Cisneros's recognition as arguably the first contemporary Chicana fiction writer to break into a mainstream American literary sphere, is evidence, in my view, of a refusal to address Cisneros outside the kind of third space Pérez describes.

I believe this resistance to be one of several explanations for the apparent inattention paid to this story within literary criticism. Before examining the story through the lens of Anzaldúa's work, I offer other potential reasons for the disregard of "One Holy Night." Literary theory on child narrators, particularly James Kincaid's work on the eroticization of childhood innocence, offers one explanation for this story being overlooked. Gayle Rubin's hierarchy of socially accepted and marginalized sexualities sheds additional light on this omission.

The Eroticism of Innocence

For over a century, no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children.

—Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex"³²

In her work on the child's perspective in literature, Alicia Otano writes that the use of a child narrator is a narrative practice largely neglected in literary theory.³³ The concept of the child's perspective as a narrative strategy emerged in the English-speaking literary sphere in the

30 For more on Sandoval's differential consciousness, see: Chéla Sandoval, "US Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders* 10 (1991): 1-24.

31 Pérez xvi.

32 Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993) 6.

33 Alicia Otano, *Speaking the Past: Child Perspective in the Asian American Bildungsroman* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2005).



eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Against the backdrop of dramatic changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the archetypal child was a symbol of adjustment and reconciliation, able to grow from immaturity to maturity.³⁴ In contrast, “One Holy Night” does not follow the developmental narrative practice that usually coincides with the use of the child perspective. The narrator’s voice does not change or develop gradually into maturity as she tells her story; instead her voice portrays an impossible hybrid of both child and adult. From the beginning of the story, her voice has distinctly child-like mannerisms, as exemplified by her use of repetition and incorrect grammar: “He said his name was Chaq ... That’s what he told me ... This is what Boy Baby said ... what I’m telling you I never told nobody, except for Rachel and Lourdes, who know everything.”³⁵

At the end of the story when the narrator is expressing what would seem to be a matured perspective (speaking about her pregnancy and a desire for future children), her voice retains its childish quality: “I’m going to have five children. Five. Two Girls. Two Boys. And one baby.”³⁶ Furthermore, her romanticization of having children and the act of denoting their sex pulls the narrator further from an adult perspective, thus resisting a development narrative such as Otano describes.

The narrator’s voice and its ability to embody both child and adult also fractures a broader cultural dissociation between child and adult, a binary that James Kincaid argues has been heavily eroticized for at least the past 200 years.³⁷ Kincaid finds that prior to the eighteenth century there was little demarcation of childhood. It was only at the turn of the nineteenth century that the concept of childhood and its need for protection by adults began to form. At that time, schools began separating children by age groups, and legislation was introduced to define at what age a child could be held accountable for committing a felony.³⁸ In addition, he credits the manufacturing of the innocent child to Rousseau, Wordsworth, and “a thousand lesser writers” of that era; as a result, we now commonly accept the child as innocent, valuable, and weak.³⁹

34 Otano 13.

35 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 27.

36 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 35.

37 James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

38 Kincaid 68.

39 Kincaid 72.

Kincaid claims that we define the child as “that species which is free of sexual feeling or response; the adult is that species which has crossed over into sexuality. The definitional base is erotic.”⁴⁰ Cisneros, however, blurs this eroticized division with her narrator in “One Holy Night.” She is a child who recognizes her sexuality and who asserts her desires in a voice that is simultaneously innocent and self-assured. “All I know is I didn’t want it like that. Not against the bricks or hunkering in somebody’s car. I wanted it to come undone like gold thread, like a tent full of birds. The way it’s supposed to be, the way I knew it would be when I met Boy Baby.”⁴¹ Though her descriptions of losing her virginity are fantastical and idealized, her voice has a distinct strength and self-awareness. Similarly, she continues: “But you must know, I was no girl back then. And Boy Baby was no boy... he seemed boy and baby and man all at once, and the way he looked at me, how do I explain?”⁴² Aware of her listeners, she tells her story as if from an older, retrospective position.

Although later she reveals that in actuality she was and still is a girl, like the lover she describes, her age is mysteriously indeterminable. Throughout the narrative she escapes the weakness and ignorance of a child, and her confidence is not childishly defiant, but calmly assured: “Then I knew what I felt for him.”⁴³ The narrator’s story frequently pauses to speak directly to her unnamed audience, as if imparting wisdom. “But the truth has a strange way of following you, of coming up to you and making you listen to what it has to say.”⁴⁴ Here she foreshadows the discovery of Boy Baby/Chaq’s true identity, while issuing a sort of warning. Even after Boy Baby’s violent and disturbing identity is revealed, the narrator recalls her desire for him: “They don’t know what it is to lay so still until his sleep breathing is heavy... to look and look without worry at the man-bones and the neck, the man-wrist and the man-jaw thick and strong, all the salty dips and hollows... to lick the fat earlobes that taste of smoke, and stare at how perfect is a man.”⁴⁵ Her childish speech pattern and repetition of the word “man,” which she attaches to every part of him, calls attention to her young age and to her fascination with

40 Kincaid 7.

41 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 28.

42 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 28.

43 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 28.

44 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 29.

45 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 35.



the unfamiliar body of an adult man. Yet she is describing herself actively engaging in an erotic situation, presumably after intercourse.

Kincaid argues that our definition of childhood establishes a fundamental purity and emptiness at the center of the child, “an absence, and an incapacity, an inability to do.”⁴⁶ The young narrator in “One Holy Night” is in direct opposition to this emptiness and incompetence. Instead, she articulates her feelings and desires both sexual or “impure” and innocent. She is self-aware and enacts her own kind of self-transformation through her storytelling. This reinvention of self and identity in the story is what I will later align with Anzaldúa’s creation of a new consciousness through “the Coatlicue state” in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Building on Kincaid’s work, Kevin Ohi, in his study of the erotic child in literature, contends that contemporary ideology of sexual normativity finds the seduction of the child pathological, a “regrettable but often eroticized fall from innocence constituted by its corruption.”⁴⁷ This eroticized innocence of the child is only visible from the retrospective perspective of its collapse, and thus the child’s insisted-upon innocence is intertwined with and entirely dependent on its corruption. This cultural phenomenon prompts Kincaid’s discourse of “erotic innocence.” His theory describes our paradoxical approach to child sexuality that allows us to eroticize children by denouncing their eroticization, constituting their allure by proclaiming their innocence. It is thus a “discourse of panic saturated with pleasure.”⁴⁸

The innocence of Cisneros’s narrator in “One Holy Night” challenges the contemporary insistence on specifically prescribed childhood innocence and refuses to deliver the pleasure we would normally derive from the story’s progression. Instead of enacting an expected and desired “fall from innocence,” the narrator is consistently and simultaneously innocent and “corrupted” throughout the entire narrative. In other words, she embodies both child and adult, which offers readers an impossible hybrid voice and a child that ruptures normative definitions of childhood.

A further complicating and difficult aspect of the narrator’s eroticism is her sexual experience with Chaq and her consent to what is legally defined as statutory rape. A sexually consenting child is a legal impossibility, and the concept of cross-generational sex is severely

46 Kincaid 71.

47 Kevin Ohi, *Innocence and Rapture: The Erotic Child in Pater, Wilde, James, and Nabokov* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 6.

48 Ohi 7.



suppressed or rejected in our culture. Thus, the few literary critics who have not disregarded or glossed over an analysis of this story assume the sexual encounter between the narrator and Chaq to be violent, the narrator in denial of her assault, and the story to be presenting an overall narrative of trauma. For example, Mary Pat Brady is one of the only critics to dedicate more than a few sentences to an analysis of “One Holy Night.”⁴⁹ Brady argues that Cisneros explores the problematics of the public/private binary through her stories, with “One Holy Night” specifically offering an analysis of how the threat of violence to women reinscribes gendered space.⁵⁰ Her evidence lies in the narrator’s introduction to Boy Baby while selling cucumbers on the street; as a young girl working in a public space, she is constantly sexually available and susceptible to violation. Brady claims that “One Holy Night” calls attention to discourses that normalize this spatial logic by obscuring it and points specifically to the narrator’s refusal to characterize her sexual encounter as rape, “even though it involves a young, vulnerable, clearly naïve girl and a much older man.”⁵¹ In Brady’s critique, we see clearly both the eroticization of and attachment to the weak, vulnerable child that Kincaid and Ohi outline. In addition, the emphasis on their age difference calls attention to our fear and disregard of consensual cross-generational desire.

In her 1984 essay “Thinking Sex,” queer theorist Gayle Rubin calls for a radically developed and changed perspective on sexuality. She interrogates modern Western society’s social hierarchy of sexualities that defines which sexual behaviors are “natural” and socially accepted and which are considered abnormal, immoral, and often illegal. Married, reproductive heterosexuals are at the top of “the erotic pyramid,” followed by monogamous and most other heterosexuals. Promiscuous or nonmonogamous homosexuals hover just above the bottom of the pyramid, while “the most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, fetishists, sadomasochists ... and the lowliest of them all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries.”⁵² Rubin writes that cross-generational sexual relationships are still seen as “unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, or transcendence.”⁵³

49 Mary Pat Brady, “The Contrapuntal Geographies of *Woman Holler Creek and Other Stories*,” *American Literature* 71.1 (1999): 117-50.

50 Brady 136.

51 Brady 138.

52 Rubin 12.

53 Rubin 15.

My claim is not necessarily that the intercourse between the narrator and Boy Baby is entirely nonviolent or consensual. Instead, I argue that cross-generational sexuality is so powerfully delegitimized, and child sexuality so feared, that when confronting the story and the complex voice it presents, we find it impossible to accept the narrator's ability to authentically desire or consent. Aware of this aversion, Cisneros has the narrator purposely obscure the age difference between herself and Boy Baby until the very end of the story. His nickname in itself is an obvious indicator of the ambiguity in age, "Boy Baby was a man. When I asked him how old he was he said he didn't know. The past and the future are the same thing. So he seemed boy and baby and man all at once."⁵⁴ The narrator declares that she was "no girl back then," even though very little time has passed between her present tense and the events of her story, as it is revealed in the end that she is still pregnant with Boy Baby's child. Her actual age is not disclosed until she casually describes being taken out of school as a result of her pregnancy: "Abuelita took me out of school when my uniform got tight around the belly and said it was a shame I wouldn't be able to graduate with the other eighth graders."⁵⁵

In her decision to make Boy Baby a serial killer of young girls, Cisneros adds excessive violence to an already challenging relationship. With this overemphasis, Cisneros offers a narrative that is aware of its difficulty and the circumvention or disregard it will elicit. Certainly "One Holy Night" is a violent, challenging narrative; a young girl struggles with her desire for a man who literally murders young girls. Nonetheless, she maintains an undeniable agency that permeates the story. With this agency, Cisneros challenges us to reconsider the violence that the story presents, instead of instinctively avoiding it. The question then becomes: what is the purpose of this difficulty? Why does Cisneros present such a challenging narrative told by the intricately powerful voice of a child? I look to Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa to examine these questions. I argue that there is a veiled manifestation of Anzaldúa's pre-Columbian goddess Coatlicue and her tumultuous spiritual process of "the Coatlicue state" in Cisneros's narrative.

54 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 28.

55 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 33.

La Herencia de Coatlicue

She is the symbol of the dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life.

—Gloria Anzaldúa on Coatlicue⁵⁶

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa engages postcolonial feminist theory, poetry, and narrative-like pedagogy to script her New Mestiza Consciousness. Anzaldúa defines the borderlands, border culture, and a “third country,” a space that is occupied by the marginalized, the persecuted, the dark-skinned, the foreign, and the “detrribalized.” But these borderlands are also home to a different, reconceptualized feminist consciousness, represented by the formulation of the New Mestiza Consciousness.⁵⁷

In the introduction to the second edition of *Borderlands*, Sonia Salvídar-Hull writes that Anzaldúa’s New Mestiza Consciousness profoundly validates Chicana selfhood and identity by refusing static notions of the self, instead theorizing the hybridity of a Chicana identity that is perpetually in motion.⁵⁸ (This resonates with the temporal fluidity of Cisneros’s narrator’s age and her fluctuating embodiment of child and adult throughout the story.) The reclamation and reinvention of the Aztec mother goddess Coatlicue is central to the development of the constantly shifting identity of her New Mestiza/Chicana feminist, through a necessary spiritual death and rebirth—what Anzaldúa calls *la herencia de Coatlicue* or “the Coatlicue state.”

Originally, in Aztec mythology Coatlicue or “she of the skirt of serpents” (*Coatl* meaning serpent) is the earth goddess who gives birth to Huitzilopochtli, the patron sun god, and his sister *Coyolxauhqui*, the moon. In the legend of his birth, Huitzilopochtli kills and physically dismembers his sister, signifying the triumph of the Aztecs as “the people of the sun” over all other peoples. (Coyolxauhqui is another important figure in Anzaldúa’s work, representing the

56 Gloria Anzaldúa, “Entering Into the Serpent” in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

57 Normal Alarcón, “Anzaldúa’s *Frontera*: Inscribing Gynetics,” *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriela F. Arrendondo et al. (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2003) 360.

58 Salvídar-Hull 4.

sensation of dismemberment or tearing apart by internalized shame and guilt.) Thus, the legend narrates the violent birth of the Aztec people from the womb of Coatlicue.⁵⁹

A giant sculpture of Coatlicue, believed to originate from the late-fifteenth century, has solidified the goddess's monstrous image and associations throughout modern history. The statue was rediscovered in Mexico City in 1790 by workers digging to construct an aqueduct, but university professors ordered the statue to be buried again to prevent such a "horrible sight" from being seen.⁶⁰ The statue, which was not displayed again until 1887, presented a depiction of the female form that scholars read as shocking and grotesque. Coatlicue (sometimes called Cihuacoatl or "serpent woman") is depicted adorned with severed hands, hearts, and skulls and wears a skirt made of rattlesnake bodies.⁶¹

Though the Spaniards vilified all indigenous religious figures in the imposition of Christianity during colonization, the denigration of Coatlicue began before the European conquest. In the section of *Borderlands* entitled "Entering Into the Serpent," Anzaldúa narrates the disempowerment and splitting of Coatlicue by the patriarchal and war-driven Aztec culture. As the feminine became something to be expelled, she writes, the powerful female deities were given monstrous attributes and male gods were substituted in their place. "They divided she who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects."⁶² Anzaldúa's development of the decolonizing "Coatlicue state" has been described by one critic as a reclamation of Chicana sexuality and power through the reunification of the mangled precolonial goddess.⁶³

Anzaldúa's work on Coatlicue, around which she constructs the discourse of her New Mestiza identity, inspired the use of pre-Columbian myth by many other Chicana feminists. Originating from Coatlicue's myth of creation and destruction, and the horrific and grotesque qualities history has assigned her, the Coatlicue state is a violent but necessary death and rebirth resulting in a new self-definition and consciousness. Anzaldúa's Coatlicue represents a

59 For the entire original myth as written in the *Florentine Codex*, see: Miguel León-Portilla, ed., "The Birth of Huitzilopochtli, Patron God of the Aztecs," *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

60 Ann De León, "Coatlicue or How to Write the Dismembered Body," *Modern Language Notes* 125.2 (2010): 260.

61 De León 279.

62 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 49.

63 George Hartley, "'Matriz sin tumba': The Trash Goddess and the Healing Matrix of Gloria Anzaldúa's Reclaimed Womb," *MELUS* 35.3 (2010): 55.



synthesis of duality and “like Medusa, she is the symbol and fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror.”⁶⁴ Immediately, this description of Coatlicue’s contradictions resonates heavily with “One Holy Night.” The character of Chaq simultaneously represents life and death: he is a serial murderer but also impregnates the narrator creating new life. The story itself is a paradox—both horrible and beautiful.

The Coatlicue state is provoked by a painful experience or disruption of the smooth flow of life. Anzaldúa writes that these experiences are what propels the soul to do its work, to increase consciousness of itself.⁶⁵ The first interaction with Coatlicue “puts you in between your old story of who you were and the new story of who you’re becoming. Te pone en nepantla, a transitional space.”⁶⁶ In “One Holy Night,” the narrator’s first engagement with Coatlicue occurs after intercourse with Chaq/Boy Baby: “Then something inside bit me, and I gave a cry as if the other, the one I wouldn’t be anymore, leapt out.”⁶⁷ This marks the beginning of her new self, a self that must accept new truths and a more difficult consciousness. This moment propels her into “nepantla” or the Coatlicue state. The narrator describes sex as her initiation as Ixchel, a Mayan goddess of the moon and fertility. Ixchel is described as similar to the Aztec Cihuatl (Coatlicue), and “encourages standing up to violence which threatens sense of self.”⁶⁸ This description is also strikingly similar to Coatlicue’s daughter Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess who Anzaldúa incorporates into the Coatlicue state as the process of “Coyolxauhqui consciousness”: when the soul comes to realizations unconsciously, in the darkness underneath depression and denial.⁶⁹

Following her first sexual experience, the narrator is exhilarated by her new knowledge of sexuality and says that she suddenly understood “what happens when the scenes in love stories begin to fade, and why brides blush, and how it is that sex isn’t simply a box you check

64 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 69.

65 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 68.

66 Keating 44.

67 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 30.

68 “Ix-Chel, Goddess of the Moon,” web, 15 Feb. 2011, <<http://www.goddessgift.com/goddess-myths/mayan-goddess-ix-chel.htm>>.

69 Keating 45.

M or *F* on in the test we get at school. I was wise.”⁷⁰ Most importantly, from this point on she actively and forcefully refuses to feel shame for what she knows is culturally shameful. At the beginning of the story she recounts how her grandmother and uncle try to locate blame for what happened: “Uncle Lalo says if they had never left Mexico in the first place, shame enough would have kept a girl from doing devil things.”⁷¹ Then, directly after she has sex, she adamantly refuses any culturally prescribed feeling of disgrace. “I know I was supposed to feel ashamed, but I wasn’t ashamed. I wanted to stand on top of the highest building, the top-top floor, and yell, I *know*.”⁷² This resistance is the narrator’s embodiment of the Shadow-Beast, another aspect of Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue. The Shadow-Beast is the feminist rebel, resisting the restrictions assigned to many subaltern women under a patriarchal community and culture. Anzaldúa writes that girls in the borderland are taught to fear sexuality and the Shadow-Beast is the part of her that emerges and “refuses to take orders from outside authorities.”⁷³ Rejection of shame emerges as a theme in the narrator’s response to the events of the story. Even after she realizes she is pregnant and her family mourns her fate, she adamantly retains her agency. “When Abuelita found out I was going to dar a luz, she cried until her eyes were little ... That is when she burned the cucumber pushcart and called me a *sinverguenza* because I *am* without shame.”⁷⁴

The Coatlicue state itself does not begin until there is a painful resistance or refusal to accept knowledge. This clearly happens for the narrator when she receives newspaper clippings of Boy Baby’s arrest in the mail: “A picture of him looking very much like stone, police hooked on either arm ... *eleven female bodies ... the last seven years ...* Then I couldn’t read but only stare at the little black-and-white dots that make up the face I am in love with.”⁷⁵ This passage suggests the paralysis and refusal that provokes what Anzaldúa describes as the “darkness” of the unconscious processing the shock and pain in the Coatlicue state. Although she already knows his true identity, the narrator rejects his violent history by refusing to read the words, and only

70 Cisernos, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 31.

71 Cisernos, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 28.

72 Cisernos, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 30.

73 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 38.

74 Cisernos, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 32. (Italics in original text)

75 Cisernos, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 34.



stares at this picture of the face she is “in love with,” illustrating shock and denial.⁷⁶ Anzaldúa describes this stage as intense repression, and during this refusal the soul is doing its work or “making soul.” This is the point at which Coatlicue “swallows and devours us, allowing us to dwell in darkness.” “One Holy Night” exists in the darkness of transitional space, of the Coatlicue state, the space Anzaldúa terms “nepantla.”

The final stage of the Coatlicue state is enacted at the end of “One Holy Night” when the narrator has finished telling her story and again speaks directly to her audience. “I’m going to have five children. Five. Two girls. Two Boys. And one baby. The girls will be called Lisette and Maritza. The boys I’ll name Pablo and Sandro. And my baby. My baby will be named Alegre, because life will always be hard.”⁷⁷ This stage, the “call for transformation,” or the call to cross over to another space, is when one must script a new self and consciousness.⁷⁸ Though this transformation may be unconscious for the narrator, she is composing a new future and identity for herself in this final part of the story. A closer reading of these sentences reveals the opposing concepts of birth and death, positive and negative. While her old self has been transformed, she describes her future as hard but hopeful in the name of “Alegre,” the Spanish word meaning “happy.” Anzaldúa also calls this final stage of the Coatlicue state “putting Coyolxauhqui together” because the creation of a new story is a recomposition.⁷⁹

Yet the concept of recomposing, or theorizing as a reparative gesture using indigenous figures as Anzaldúa does, requires a closer examination. Sheila Contreras and Norma Alarcón problematize this movement of indigenist feminism in their critiques of Anzaldúa’s work. Contreras questions the reappropriation of the native woman in Chicana feminist work, such as Anzaldúa has done with Coatlicue and other mythic female figures in *Borderlands*. Contreras argues that the reclamation of La Malinche, which began in the mid-1970s, occurred at the developing point of Chicana indigenist feminism, and this formed the elevated, gendered racial

76 We see evidence of this same denial and resistance earlier in the story as well. When the narrator first visits Boy Baby’s room and he shows her his collection of guns, she says, “he showed me the guns—twenty-four in all. Rifles and pistols, one rusty musket, a machine gun, and several tiny weapons with mother-of-pearl handles that looked like toys. So you’ll see who I am, he said, laying them all out on the bed of newspapers. So you’ll understand. But I didn’t want to know.” See: Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 29.

77 Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 35.

78 Keating 47.

79 Keating 47.



subject of the indigenous woman.⁸⁰ Contreras describes *Borderlands* as the best-known illustration of the feminist indigenist tradition, wherein Anzaldúa attempts to claim and mobilize the indigenous in the Chicana by “valorizing vilified Aztec symbols such as snake goddess Coatlicue.”⁸¹ She situates *Borderlands* in the trajectory of Chicana feminist challenges to Chicano patriarchy through its emphasis and glorification of indigenous origins. She cites Norma Alarcón’s critique of feminist re-appropriations of La Malinche, in which Chicanas began “filling her” with their own intentions, significances, and desires.⁸² This is the same gesture that Anzaldúa makes with Coatlicue, reconfiguring her as a tool with which to liberate and reconstruct the wounded condition of the Mestiza. Anzaldúa explicitly uses Coatlicue and the mythical indigenous woman to, as she describes, “heal the wounds of colonialism,”⁸³ or as Alarcón terms it, to “reinscribe what has been lost through colonization.”⁸⁴ Indeed, in an interview with Anzaldúa, Irene Lara describes her as a “modern-day Coyolxuahqui, a writer-warrior who employs language to put us back together again.”⁸⁵

Contreras questions, however, what it means to accept that the indigeneity of Chicanas can be represented metaphorically through mythology or the construction of a mythic female identity. She writes that this acceptance positions us as modern anthropologists and complicates Chicana/os’ relationship to contemporary indigenous communities in the United States and Mexico.⁸⁶ Furthermore, reconstructed pre-Columbian mythology and Chicana indigenist texts are “deeply indebted to language and images first disseminated by European writers as part of colonialist endeavors.”⁸⁷ This critique raises questions about Anzaldúa’s reclamation of

80 Sheila Marie Contreras, *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism and Chicana/o Literature* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2008) 103.

81 Contreras 106.

82 Contreras 112.

83 Keating 55.

84 Alarcón 366.

85 As quoted in Keating 41. This recalls a similar problematic conflation of women-of-color writers with their subject matter, which has occurred frequently with Cisneros. Lara’s interview with Anzaldúa is entitled “Daughter of Coatlicue: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa.”

86 Contreras 113.

87 Contreras 114.



precolonial goddesses in order to suture the “wounds of colonialism,” especially if the mythological material she draws upon relies on a colonizing perspective.⁸⁸

Cisneros’s “One Holy Night” intricately calls into question the lens through which we look at Chicana writers. Instead of empowering or reinventing cultural archetypes, this challenging narrative is located outside the space of difference assigned to Chicana stories. This story powerfully resists containment in a space of “otherness” by presenting a narrator who not only fractures our eroticized preservation of childish innocence but also sustains her own agency through a reinvention of self, offering an impossible hybridity of child and adult. Anzaldúa’s reclaimed Aztec mother goddess Coatlicue resonates powerfully with the narrator’s fusion of innocence and agency. “One Holy Night” exists in the transitional space of Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue state, a transformative spiritual process of reinvention using emotional pain to construct a new consciousness. Yet Cisneros also mirrors Anzaldúa’s critics when she passes this already troubling sexual encounter through the filter of fetishized indigeneity. Thus, the reader is left with a character neither empowered nor victimized by the violence of the story and is instead confronted with a more complex space of self-definition and a critique of social and artistic limits rendered both for and by third-world women. “One Holy Night” is one of Cisneros’s most beautiful and compelling stories, in large part because it so quietly but powerfully challenges us to face our capacity as readers to confront violence and astonishing agency. The difficulty of Cisneros’s story and its critical disregard calls for an interrogation of the way we read Chicana writers and their stories.

88 What gesture toward an indigenous past and the constructed native woman is Anzaldúa making in her attempts to reunify and restore a fragmented Mestiza subject? By relying on European and Euro-American representations of pre-Columbian Mexico and Aztec mythology to ground her most potent assertions of the indigenous in her *New Mestiza Consciousness*, is Anzaldúa employing a colonial language in her self-emancipatory gesture to repair Mestiza subjectivity? Furthermore, by simply reclaiming and valorizing a denigrated indigenous goddess, is Anzaldúa radically challenging the language of patriarchy or colonialism, or is she just creating an inversion? Though I argue Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue state resides within Cisneros’s narrative, these questions problematize the work Anzaldúa does with Coatlicue and ask us to look more closely at what it means to theorize a reparative reappropriation of an indigenous figure.

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