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Mestiza Consciousness of La Frontera/Borderlands
in Sandra Cisneros and Helena Maria Viramontes

Linda Rader Overman

Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicana poet, essayist, fiction writer, and feminist critic, defines the "place of contact between the dominant culture and non-dominant cultures" (Wheatwind) as the "borderlands," the place from whence a consciousness of difference derives. Looking at Chicana culture "with all our differences amongst us as well as looking at the clash of dominant culture and Mexican culture, with the use of the border as a metaphor," (Wheatwind) she expounds upon this metaphor in her seminal text *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which explores the complexities of the Chicana identity and what she theorizes as *la consciencia de la mestiza*.

A Chicana-tejana growing up in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas and a lesbian, Anzaldúa is of working class origins. Embracing a hybrid identity, she asserts she is not claimed by any one specific category of sexuality, race, culture, class or gender, but proclaims:

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. (v)

By exploring a consciousness of the Borderlands, Anzaldúa argues that the Chicana identity is hybrid rather than fragmented. *Las Chicanas* are a border people confronting the

challenges of living between the United States of America and the United States of Mexico. In confronting their challenges, these women are shaped by a mestiza consciousness which "assumes a prophetic voice to create—by mythic, spiritual, mystic, intuitive and imaginative means—a new vision of different kinds of borderlands, sexual or cultural, religious or racial, psychological or creative" (Ramírez 185-86). *La mestiza's* domain contains "various kinds of borders simultaneously"; tolerating contradictions, *la mestiza* operates "in a pluralistic mode" (Anzaldúa 79) as the "supreme crosser of cultures" (Anzaldúa 84).

Anzaldúa speaks of this struggle in "keeping one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity" (58) intact by generating the condition of the uncomfortable familiar, i.e. "no not comfortable but home." In acknowledging *mestiza* consciousness and the multiplicity it engenders, Anzaldúa creates "a third space, the in-between, border, or interstice that allows contradictions to co-exist" (Yarbro-Bejarano 11). Anzaldúa proclaims in *Borderlands/La Frontera* as well that "the culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*" (Anzaldúa 17).

Sandra Cisneros and Helena Maria Viramontes inhabit this space through their literary allegiance to Chicana women of color. Each constructs women who grasp their hybridity, and through the act of writing, give themselves the ability to ultimately transcend repressive lives and embrace being *mujeres malas*.

Echoing Anzaldúa, Cisneros feels trapped by constricted patriarchal paradigms: "I guess as Mexican daughters we're not supposed to have our own house. We have our father's house and then he hands us over to our husband's" (Aranda 73). Challenging this cultural paradigm,

Cisneros examines the *mujer mala* through her character Esperanza Cordero in the story "The House on Mango Street," from the eponymous novel.

A pre-adolescent Esperanza's desire for "a real house," expresses, by metaphoric extension, her need to break free of the Chicano cultural prototype about which Anzaldúa writes. Dreaming of her own home that is not dilapidated, shabby, and shameful, Esperanza wants another house/identity to be hers. Esperanza wants not just "a room of her own," but a house of her own, signaling her ascent into middle-class achievement, and the house her mama "dreamed up in the stories she told us before we went to bed" (Cisneros 4):

The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody, or share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there isn't a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom. But even so, it's not the house we'd thought we'd get . . . (3-4)

Esperanza discovers that a dwelling is a reflection of who one is; and in the eyes of the dominant culture, she ascertains just who she is perceived to be:

You live *there*?

There. I had to look to where she [a nun from my school] pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. (4-5)

Esperanza's realization of her *otherness* is glaringly brought to light in this passage. By answering truthfully (as most children do) and pointing to her tattered and rundown living space, Esperanza is observed to be just as shabby as the apartment above a laundromat. Hence she proclaims: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go" (5). Esperanza soon discovers that she does not simply want to deny an identity associated with poverty, but rather desires to create an independent identity. Rather than embracing a white middle-class norm, Esperanza adopts the identity of a borderlands writer, who chooses to become a self-autonomous person. Anzaldúa expounds:

For a woman of my culture [and Esperanza's] there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons.

(17)

Esperanza refuses to affiliate herself with any of these "three directions." And in order to reach an empowered identity, she must understand her relationship to the past. As Maria Elena de Valdés emphasizes, Esperanza's "sense of alienation is compounded because she is ethnically Mexican, although culturally Mexican American; she is a young girl surrounded by examples of abused, defeated, worn-out women" (57).

Esperanza's great-grandmother, and her namesake, is just such a person. Esperanza identifies with her great-grandmother's rebellious spirit; however, she prefers not to inherit her future. Esperanza, hope in English, explains that in Spanish "it means sadness, it means waiting":

My great-grandmother. I would've like to have known her,
a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my
great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. . .
She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many
women sit their sadness on an elbow . . . I have inherited her name,
but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. ("My Name,"
10-11)

Although Esperanza focuses upon the oppression internalized in her culture, Anzaldúa points to the historical roots of that oppression tracing her own great-grandmother's suffering from similar repression: losing her cattle and all of her land, Anzaldúa's grandmother loses her identity. Her story, however, begins when a Gringo swindled her land away following "the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on February 2, 1848" (Anzaldúa 7) creating the border fence that "divides the Mexican people," leaving "100,000 Mexican citizens on this side, annexed by conquest along with the land." Anzaldúa describes, in her usual code-switching manner, the repression that happened after:

Mexican-American resisters robbed a train in . . . Texas . . . in 1915, Anglo
vigilante groups began lynching Chicanos. Texas Rangers would take them into

the brush and shoot them. One hundred Chicanos were killed in a matter of months . . . "

"Drought hit South Texas," my mother tells me. "*La tierra se puso bien seca y los animales comenzaron a morir de se'*. *Mi papá se murió de un heart attack dejando a mamá pregnant y con ocho huercos*, with eight kids and one on the way. *Yo fuí la mayor, tenía diez años*. The next year the drought continued y *el ganado* got hoof and mouth. *Se calleron* in droves *en las pastas y el brushland, pansas blancas* ballooning to the skies. *El siguiente año* still no rain. . . . A smart *gabacho* lawyer took the land away *mamá* hadn't paid taxes. *No hablaba inglés*, she didn't know how to ask for time to raise the money. . . . Mama Locha had asked that we bury her there beside her husband. *El cementerio estaba cercado*. But there was a fence around the cemetery, chained and padlocked by the ranch owners of the surrounding land. . . . [A] sign read: "Keep out. Trespassers will be shot." (8)

Fictively and historically, we see cogent examples by Cisneros and Anzaldúa of the oppression of La Chicana/Mexicana by, not only the dominant culture, *Anglos* who murdered and pillaged, but worse—by Mexicanos/Chicanos who oppress the women of their own race. Nevertheless, Esperanza will not *wait by the window and wonder how it could have been*. Esperanza's connection to "a wild horse of a woman" gains ground as Esperanza "comes to an understanding of herself, her world, and her culture" (González-Berry 114). The ties to her

great-grandmother are bonds to that part of herself that "no one sees" and to her namesake who was prevented from obtaining her own vision.

Esperanza, however, looking at her own small society sees the portraits of many entrapped women. For instance, Rafaela is one woman who seems to be a representation of ideal beauty, exactly what a woman would want to be. But what does it get her: a jealous husband who traps her by the window. This happened to Esperanza's great-grandmother in the past, but it is also happening in the present. In fact the very women who seem to be the luckiest—the most beautiful—can also be the ones who are most entrapped. Hence, in "Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays," Rafaela is ultimately trapped, although she yearns to live *la-mala-vida-de-una-mala-mujer*:

on Tuesdays Rafaela's husband comes home late because that's the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out of the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away Rafaela leans out the window and leans on her elbow and dreams . . . On the corner there is music from the bar, and Rafaela wishes she could go there and dance before she gets old. (79)

The truth is Rafaela will get old and will not in fact "go there and dance." She won't live the life of *la mala mujer* since the rebel in her is not strong enough. Anzaldúa would argue that instead of being the "perfect" woman, one should take on another role, that of the Shadow-Beast:

It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. . . . It is part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At least the hint

of limitations on my time and space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts.

(Anzaldúa 16)

Yet some of these Chicanas will never empower the shadow beast in themselves to bolt far enough or at all. Only Alicia, like Esperanza, in "Alicia Who Sees Mice," is driven by her shadow beast, to leave a miserable life of internal oppression imposed by a tortilla-eating-father and culture. Alicia's father continually insists:

Close your eyes . . . And anyway, a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early . . . Alicia, whose mama died, is sorry there is no one older to rise and make the lunchbox tortillas. Alicia . . . is young and smart and studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind the rolling pin. Is a good girl, my friend, studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. (31-32)

Alicia, through the avenue of education, escapes on "two trains and a bus." Anzaldúa too chose a similar path to Alicia's and Esperanza's:

I was the first in six generations to leave the Valley, the only one in my family to ever leave home. But I didn't leave all the parts of me: I kept the ground of my own being. On it I walked away, taking with me the land, the Valley, Texas. *Gané mi camino y me largué. Muy andariega mi hija.* Because I left of my own accord *me dicen*, "¿Cómo te gusta la mala vida?" (Anzaldúa 15-16)

In Esperanza's tales we see a "girl who didn't want to belong," (Cisneros 109) but likes "to tell stories," and we see that she will eventually find a form of liberation by being a "budding writer of poems" (González-Berry 117): "one day . . . I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong . . . to keep me here forever" (Cisneros 110).

Anzaldúa, Esperanza, and Alicia all inhabit a borderland arena, an "in-between," from which they write and remember. Sometimes, memory/re-memory enables our "ability to retrieve and organize images and events from the personal past" (Hampl 313). It is then that we can "carry our wounds" forward and "learn not only to tell stories but to listen to what our stories tell us." Through re-memory Esperanza and Alicia will affirm what they were, what they were not, and what they have become.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros primarily focuses on one woman; in *Woman Hollering Creek*, a collection of short stories, she focuses on many women. Although some are defeated, some resist by embracing the ultimate *mujer mala*—La Llorona—"the weeping woman" (Madison 12). According to the standard myth, La Llorona was a woman "who, upon discovering her husband's infidelity, murdered their children and was condemned to an eternity of sorrow and weeping. According to legend, she continues to wander through the night crying out for her children." La Llorona, however, comes in many versions. The image that is most significant for Cisneros is the woman who by choice or circumstance fails to conform to obligatory feminine roles.

Anzaldúa interpolates her version of such roles with pronouncements of resistance:

My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman's history of resistance. The Aztec female rites of mourning were rites of defiance protesting the cultural changes which disrupted the equality and balance between female and male, and protesting their demotion to a lesser status, their denigration. Like *la Llorona*, the Indian woman's only means of protest was wailing. (21)

Cisneros, in *Woman Hollering Creek*, gives us women who attempt to free themselves from a paradigmatic world of constricted roles in which the *ideal* woman represents admirable suffering and absolute love. If she does not choose the role of the nun or the mother, a woman risks stigmatization as a *mujer mala*, or if she does not marry she is made to feel like a total failure. Yet Cisneros acknowledges the woman who challenges these paradigms pays a cost.

In her title story; "Woman Hollering Creek," Cisneros first creates a character who wants to live under the guise of wife/mother, but finding herself in an abusive relationship she must choose some mode of resistance. Ultimately, she finds this choice no less dangerous than the first and she ends up escaping back to the man who said, "I am your father, I will never abandon you" (Cisneros 43).

And so Cleófilas Enriqueta De León Hernández, the young Mexican bride whose father gave Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez permission to marry, originally comes north of the border to live with her new husband, an ice house worker. This journey from North to South is a common one. Cleófilas and Juan must drive:

over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town *en el otro lado*—on the other side . . .

their new home in Seguin [Texas] . . . Poor thing. And without even a mama to advise her on things like her wedding night. Well, may God help her. What with a father with a head like a burro, and those six clumsy brothers. (43-45)

Cleófilas foresees her life like the many *telenovelas* she watches. What she's "been waiting for . . . has been anticipating since she was old enough to lean against the window displays of gauze and butterflies and lace, is passion" (44). However, she couldn't help wondering "why the name Woman Hollering" (46) of the creek behind her not-exactly-new-house fascinated her so:

La Gritona. Such a funny name for such a lovely *arroyo*. . . . Though no one could say whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain. The natives only knew the *arroyo* one crossed on the way to San Antonio, and then once again on the way back, was called Woman Hollering, a name no one from these parts questioned, little less understood . . . (46-47)

Cleófilas's dreams lay in the display window she enjoys looking at with its gauze, butterflies, and lace. Perhaps she should have looked beyond it, rather than focus merely on the frills that first catch the eye and hide the defects. Hence, Cleófilas justifies her choice, of what Anzaldúa calls "to the home as a mother" (17), for "the man I have waited my whole life for" (Cisneros 49).

Cleófilas, however, begins to question herself:

She has to remind herself why she loves him . . . Or wonder a little when he kicks the refrigerator and says he hates this shitty house and is going out where he won't

be bothered with the baby's howling and her suspicious questions, and her requests to fix this and this and this because if she had any brains in her head she'd realize he's been up before the rooster earning his living to pay for . . . the roof over her head . . . why can't you just leave me in peace, woman. . . . (49)

Here the frills in the display window fail to hide the cruelty of a telenovela gone wrong, and ugliness erupts, actuality intervenes. Reality in *la frontera* betrays Cleófilas and her dreams.

Now in her *telenovelas*, "the episodes [get] sadder and sadder. And there [are] no commercials in between for comic relief. And no happy ending in sight" (53) with her man in Texas.

Cleófilas decides going back home to Mexico and facing the looks "with one baby on her hip and one in the oven" (50) is better than remaining in the borderland—a "town of gossips."

Cleófilas is not only trapped by her husband's machismo, but by 500 hundred years of *history/His-tory* which has imposed silence and social ostracism on her story/*Her-story*, making her and others like her indiscernible, silent, and unseen. It is this legacy that Cisneros gives her women to fight against and against which Anzaldúa protests:

The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for [500] years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. For [500] years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people . . . For [500] years she was invisible, she was not heard . . . she concealed her fire; and she kept stoking the inner flame. (22-23)

The flame that burns is that of the ultimate *mujer mala*, who cultivates that inner fire, who drowns her own children rather than submit them or herself to further subjugation. *La mujer mala* calls to Cleófilas, albeit there is one place she could go, not to the houses on either side of her two neighbors, but to the creek "now in the springtime, because of the rains, a good-size alive thing, a thing with a voice all its own, all day and all night calling in its high, silver voice. Is it La Llorona, the weeping woman? La Llorona, who drowned her own children" (Cisneros 51). Accordingly, Cisneros revises the myth about a woman who kills her children into one that points the way for resistance for Cleófilas. In fact, she soon meets her own *llorona* figure, Felice, a social worker at the women's shelter, who belongs to herself alone. She brings joy and laughter to Cleófilas who is astonished by her liberated state, her freedom with language and, the fact that she actually drives a pickup truck:

when they drove across the *arroyo*, the driver opened her mouth and let out a yell as loud as any mariachi. Which startled not only Cleófilas, but Juan Pedrito as well.

Pues, look how cute. I scared you two, right? Sorry.

Should've warned you. Every time I cross that bridge I do that . . .

.Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler . . . Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing around here is named after a woman? . . .

She was laughing (55)

Felice has arrived at that place, "the epitome of happiness" (Fiore 70), where by choice she is independent, and instead of hollering from anger or pain she can laugh, scoff even, at one of the

Chicano patriarchal bastions: the-definition-of-a-good-girl is a virgin. Instead, Felice aligns the word "arroyo" (which in Spanish means brook or stream, and in the context of street means gutter) with anything but a virgin. Felice subverts the idea of "feminine sorrow" by being the embodiment of happiness as her name suggests:

That's why I like the name *arroyo*. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right? . . .

I used to have a Pontiac Sunbird. But those cars are for *viejas*.

Pussy cars. Now this here is a *real* car. (Cisneros 55)

In driving a car that is typically designed for a man, Felice challenges the stereotype of the dependent woman. These new partners/sisters holla/laugh while crossing the arroyo, which commands that the women holler. Cleófilas still cannot believe a woman like this exists:

What kind of talk was that coming from a woman?

Cleófilas thought. But then again, Felice was like no woman she'd ever met. Can you imagine, when we crossed the *arroyo* she just started yelling like a crazy . . . Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn't Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water. (55-56)

Stepping away from her victimization and silence, Cleófilas makes a small stride toward freedom in her encounter with Felice. Felice inhabits all aspects of the borderland identity. Thus, Anzaldúa might just characterize Felice as being "a new *mestiza* . . . [con] *una consciencia de mujer [mala]*. . . a consciousness of the Borderlands" (Anzaldúa 77).

Like Sandra Cisneros, Helena Maria Viramontes also explores the repression of women and the means by which they resist oppression. In *The Moths and Other Stories*, Viramontes exemplifies the struggle these women must undergo simply to survive one day "of a life ruled by unfairness" (Badeaux 4). Viramontes creates women resistance fighters who in their own way take on the role of Anzaldúa's Shadow-Beast:

Some of [them] conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear—that [they] will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage . . . Yet still others . . . take it another step: [they] try to waken the Shadow-Beast inside . . . (Anzaldúa 20)

However, to wake the Shadow-Beast can be dangerous as the role of resistance often comes with a measure of sacrifice.

The young fourteen-year-old narrator of "The Moths" does not fit in at home among her perfect sisters who crochet and embroider nor does she feel at home in church where "the coolness of the . . . frozen statues with blank eyes" (Viramontes 25) reminds her that she "was alone" (25) and why she "had never returned" (25). Although her father demands that she must go, she wants to escape from church; however, when she rebels, she causes dissension in the family. Her father insists she attend church: "he would grab my arm and dig his nails into me to make sure I understood the importance of catechism" (25). When he sees he has no affect upon her, he directs his anger at her mother causing her sister to turn upon her: "Can't you see what it's doing to Amá, you idiot?" (25). In the end the idiot ultimately relents.

Her grandmother, though, accepts her, even her shadows. Abuelita has seen the girl through all the “rages” (23) of her early childhood, scarlet fever, whippings, and puberty. Only at Abuelita's does her *nieta* learn the power of folk medicine as she plants Abuelita's "wild lilies or jasmine or heliotrope or cilantro or hierbabuena in red Hills Brothers coffee cans" (24). Only while Abuelita watches, does she feel "safe and guarded and not alone." Abuelita constructs a place her *nieta* feels she has potential to be healed and be a healer—a *curandera*.

As a young *curandera* she comes to learn the comfort of place, and the power of life and death. Abuelita offers her *nieta* an awareness of difference, creating within her a borderland space, a mestiza consciousness allowing her to confront life's own shadows—her grandmother's death. As a result the young narrator cradles Abuelita's wasted body in a ceremonial bath of baptism and cleansing of the dead. Now as a young priestess, she submerses Abuelita into the water, and the “tub overflowed and poured onto the tile of the floor”:

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. Dying is lonely and I wanted to go where the moths were . . . 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 . . .(28)

It is at this point that the young girl transforms into a shadow-beast of rebellion who finds a borderland arena of healing. Unlike her sisters, she cannot conform to society's norms, but she can become a *curandera* and a priestess. Her anger at her mother melts away:

The bathroom filled with moths, 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 ripped into circles and circles of sadness and relief.

As Virginia Adán-Lifante writes:

A pesar de que rodear la luz es un comportamiento normal de las polillas, en el cuento refuerza la idea de regeneración como búsqueda de nuevos valores, ya que aquí la luz tiene la misma función que el fuego purificador. (369)

[In spite of the fact that circling the light is a normal behavior for moths, in the short story it reinforces the idea of regeneration as a search for new values since here the light has the same function as the purifying fire.]

Through this purification process, the child becomes the woman *curandera*, the rebel becomes the priestess. Therefore as *curandera*-priestess she now has the ability to “[picture] herself . . . located at this moment of life and death” (Stockton 214) transitioning magically between one world and another. Ultimately, with her grandmother’s help, her shadow-beast finds an alternate space—the space of healing. Yet Viramontes’s women do not always find an alternate space, sometimes only a space of resistance.

Viramontes critiques the restrictive culture that imposes such rigid gender roles upon its women that they are forced to take excessive actions in order to individuate their shadow beasts, to challenge society’s dismissive words: “Tu eres mujer” (Viramontes 32). Anzaldúa reminds us:

“You're nothing but a woman” means you are defective . . . The modern meaning of the word “machismo,” . . . is actually an Anglo invention. For men like my father, being “macho” meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love. Today's macho has doubts . . . [h]is “machismo” is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem . . . loss of a sense of dignity and respect in the macho breeds a false machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them. (83)

Women respond to this false machismo with “defiant resignation” (Viramontes 56), as Viramontes’s last story presents a woman who takes a gun, the phallic symbol of a man, and finds herself going against a woman.

Ironically, in “Neighbors,” a Chicana in the act of resistance kills, not an angry husband or a threatening male, but another woman. Aura Rodriguez is so isolated from her community over the “past seventy-three years” (102) that the first thing we learn is that she “always stayed within her perimeters, both personal and otherwise, and expected the same of her neighbors.” Suffering from the pain of her aged body and its aching joints, she’s terrorized by the Bixby Boys, a local gang, who play loud music and throw “beer cans in her yard” (108). After calling the police, who respond with excessive force, Aura realizes her vengefulness toward them is a mistake. Toastie, a boy she has watched grow up, runs from the police toward her:

it was not until he lunged for the door that she was able to see the desperation and confusion, the fear in his eyes, and he screamed at the top of his lungs while pounding on her door . . . he screamed to her, “Pleeeeeeease.” (109)

Soon his supplications turn into threats of “We’ll get you,” by his other friends.

In the meantime Aura's elderly and lonely neighbor, Don Fierro, who lives in the small house behind her, has a visitor one day: “a massive woman with a vacuous hole . . . a distinct scent accompanying her. She was barefooted and her feet, which are cracked, dirty and encrusted with dry blood, were impossible to imagine once babysmall and soft” (102). Fierro and his visitor bond in such a way that Aura becomes curious enough to “peer into their bedroom window” (110) and listen along with them to their music playing on the record-player. A healing presence, the woman with the caked-hairsprayed-on-wig dances and feeds Don Fierro's mouth as well as his soul. He could only pronounce that everything she cooked was “all so good [as] he reached over the table to touch her hand” (116). But for Aura things take on a darker turn.

Threats turn to reality as Aura's garden and home are desecrated by the Bixby Boys, and Aura refuses to sit passively: “she refused to be their sacrificial lamb” (112). She readies herself for the next wave of “we’ll get you” (109) with an old gun, clumsy and cold, but lethal just the same. Finally Don Fierro dies, but not before enjoying the happiness from this warm mass of sleeping woman, in effect a *curandera*, who comforted him, and stayed with him until the end when “in short fits of spasms, his life snapped” (117). What she does not know is, what is waiting for her on the other side of the front house door she has run to for help is the Shadow-Beast of the darker side ready to shoot at anyone or any snakes, “rattlers,” who might strike out at her (in the guise of the Bixby Boys). Aura is ready with her gun "held high with both hands,

squeezing, tightly squeezing it as she aimed at the door" (118) where the barefooted woman stood panting.

In their article "With a Pistol in *Her* Hand: Rearticulating the Corrido Narrative in Helena María Viramontes's 'Neighbors'," JoAnn Pavletich and Margot Gayle Backus argue that Aura becomes a "male corrido hero":

she confronts an ambiguously culturally situated adversary who stands outside her . . . literal and conceptual field of vision. Poised in ambiguous self-defense of her ambiguous right, Aura Rodrigues takes up an ancient pistol she finds in her basement and assumes, while she simultaneously transforms, the conventional stance of the male corrido hero, with *his* pistol in *her* hand. (128)

To take a pistol in hand indeed is an act of resistance, but ultimately she kills another woman rather than undergo a transformation, Aura deteriorates into a disconnected self, fragmented by isolation, distrust, envy and revenge. The Chicana she murders has committed no crime other than to embrace the light-bearing-side of her shadow-beast as a healer/curandera. The deadly cost of Aura's "ambiguous right" imperils both herself and her sister within the culture and within her community. She gains nothing and is not transformed into anything other than a murderess, appropriating her own "false machismo." The woman, whose name we are never told, could have been Aura's *curandera* as well. "*His* pistol in *her* hand" (128) does not empower Aura, but creates a broken-shadow-beast sitting in a cell and never rising to an awareness of herself nor of *la consciencia de la mestiza*.

Las Chicanas, in the fictional works of Cisneros and Viramontes, have been shaped by Anzaldúa's *consciousness/theory* of the Borderlands. This theory enables these characters to inhabit an alternate “third space” (Yarbro-Bejarano 11) thereby creating a mestiza consciousness, which drives them to resist multiple forms of oppression: internal and external. However, they come to the realization that by taking on the form of the resistance fighter—whether in the figure of *la mujer mala*, *la llorona* or the shadow beast—such resistance does not come without great price, to the one and to the many.

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