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Amphibious, Ambiguous, Anguished:
Chicana Emotion Represented in Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek"

"Chicana" refers to a woman of Mexican descent who was born in or resides in the US, the term popularized by the Chicano Movement of the 1960s (Gallardo). According to Sandra Cisneros, a Chicana writer like herself "makes a commitment to our culture, writing in a politically conscious way." This consciousness, as we see in Cisneros's 1992 short story collection, comes from examining "issues that mainstream society doesn't necessarily want to hear," issues that Cisneros derives inspiration from, like "struggles and working-class people and oppression and pain," (Torres 223). But how exactly is her representation of these feelings—notably anguish—related to the Chicana experience? In this essay, I find out by examining three of the most notable selections in "Woman Hollering Creek:" its titular story, "Never Marry a Mexican," and "*Bien Pretty*." I end by concluding that anguish is a common theme among these works; in order for Cisneros's main characters to achieve happiness, they must be conscious of the ideas by which they live and willing to reshape the ones that cause them grief.

We'll begin with "Woman Hollering Creek," a story about Cleófilas, who's "another one of those brides from across the border" that suffers abuse from her husband and falls into a depression before eventually making her escape in a truck with an independent, helpful woman named Felice (Cisneros 54). Cisneros wrote this story based on true events. Her recollection of them speaks of woe: "That woman I gave a ride to [...] stayed with me for a long time and I wrote about her because she haunted me and that was also me. I've also been the victim of

violence like that,” (Torres 204). Connection based on shared experience serves as a narrative base, but certain aspects of culture often produce shared experiences. Cisneros points this out, describing Chicano culture as “very male-dominated,” which means that women like she and Cleófilas “have had to deal with all the guilt and all the tears and the frustration that means,” (Torres 218). Ana María Almería claims that this patriarchal mindset enables Cleófilas’s husband Juan Pedro’s abuse, saying that “the role of women within the Chicano culture not only remained submissive in the 1980s, but also [...] this submissiveness created a favorable atmosphere for the development of domestic violence,” (63). Cisneros shows how misogyny envelops Chicana lives in the narrative’s motifs: Cleófilas’s obsession with *telenovelas*, her Texana friends’ lives, and the legend of *La Llorona*. I will focus on these same details with particular emphasis on emotion.

In her beloved Spanish soap operas, Cleófilas admires “[t]he beautiful Lucía Mendez having to put up with all kinds of hardships of the heart, separation and betrayal, and loving, always loving no matter what, because that is the most important thing.” With her friends in Mexico, she discussed the shows and even copied actresses’ hairstyles (Cisneros 44). The repeated dramatic portrayals of women in the *telenovelas* reduce femininity to emotional dependence— “always loving no matter what” —that normalizes Cleófilas’s suffering. In America her household can’t afford a TV, so she’s unable to catch up on episodes, and after Juan Pedro’s violence takes its toll, she realizes that this culture conditioned her to excuse abuse in the name of phantom hope for happiness to come. “Cleofilas thought her life would have to be like that, like a *telenovela*, only now the episodes got sadder and sadder. And there were no commercial breaks in between for comic relief. And no happy ending in sight. She thought this when she sat with the baby out by the creek behind the house,” (52–53). Notice how Cisneros makes sure to mention *where* Cleófilas has this realization, too; the arroyo (a creek-watered

gully) behind Cleófilas's house is named La Gritona after *La Llorona*, a "hollering woman" from Mexican folklore. "[S]ome key elements remain common to the varying tales: La Llorona is a mother; her children die; a body of water is present; she cries out in the night," Shannon Wilson reports. "[A]s a result of losing her children, La Llorona is doomed to spend eternity traveling through the night howling in pain and loneliness, searching for her lost offspring," (46).

Cleófilas's story is a retelling of this myth, and *La Llorona*'s legend warns her of her fate if she were to abandon her motherly role, creating anxiety. There's definitely no happy end in sight for Cleófilas because, interpreting the myth as others do, she can't see why a woman would be hollering if not in anguish.

Cleófilas is not the only symbolic figure. She has two neighbor friends named Soledad and Dolores, who "were too busy remembering the men who had left through either choice or circumstance and would never come back," (47). In Spanish, Soledad translates to "loneliness" and Dolores to "pain;" the same two adjectives used to describe *La Llorona*'s hollering in the previous quote. In this Texas town "built so that you have to depend on husbands. Or you stay home. Or you drive. If you're rich enough to own, allowed to drive, your own car," (50–51) the neighbor ladies' proximity to Cleófilas reiterates the dismal composition of Chicana life; men dominate most space and thought. We don't see an optimistic representation of a Chicana until we meet Felice ("happiness"), a self-supportive, unmarried woman who Cleófilas is surprised to find *does* own a vehicle. Almería posits that Felice is a window that shows Cleófilas and the reader "how different cultures help define and establish distinct identities and how male and female roles can vary across borders," because "[Chicano] cultural products blind women in a way that they are not able to see this discrimination until they find out how other women belonging to different cultures, like America's, live their lives far away from the male's

hegemony” (68). I partly disagree with the implication here that Chicanas depend on American culture for liberation because of Cisneros’s above description of how the American towns are built (Cisneros 50), the past tense used to convey Cleófilas’s *telenovela*-culture awakening (52), and the fact that Cleófilas’s escape from her husband will bring her back to Mexico from where she came. Nonetheless, Felice’s character empowers Cleófilas. When the women drive across the bridge over the arroyo, Felice laughs and lets out a startling yell, explaining that she does it because of the creek’s name. Cleófilas, as earlier discussed, thought *La Llorona* hollered from “[p]ain or rage, perhaps, but not a hoot like the one Felice had just let go,” 56. Cleófilas feels “amazed,” by Felice and by her changed mindset (55). Felice’s jubilant action cancels out the negativity in the weeping woman legend, subverting the portrayal of doomed, sad, suffering femininity, and this retelling of that story is Cisneros’s way of critiquing misogyny in Chicano culture. She says that “there’s no way that you’re going to keep some traditions if they oppress you; there’s just no way you can survive and that is first and foremost what you have to realize,” (Torres 220). In “Woman Hollering Creek,” Felice makes sure Cleófilas survives her oppressive situation and teaches Cleófilas how to analyze aspects of culture.

That’s not the case for Clemencia in “Never Marry a Mexican,” who lives by the warning in the title, given to her by her mother after her mother “had to put up with all the grief a Mexican family can put on a girl because she was from *el otro lado*, the other side, and my father had married down by marrying her. If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado*, that would’ve been different. That would’ve been marrying up, even if the white girl was poor,” (Cisneros 69). In this quote, bitter Clemencia sketches out the prejudice of the class and race-based system of her borderland world and hints at intergenerational trauma. Her awareness of her culture takes a promising first step toward reclamation via metamorphosis, as she

recognizes what Shannon Wilson illustrates: “[T]he Chicana lives in a perpetual state of ambiguous identity, having to mold herself to the social expectations of women from diverse points of view,” (31). Clemencia is a woman first, a Mexican next, and poor last. Yet she boldly claims “I’m amphibious. I’m a person who doesn’t belong to any class,” (Cisneros 71) —“class” here implying multiple hierarchies. As we’ll soon see, this claim is a contradiction, a desperate denial protecting Clemencia from further frustration due to her low place in the hierarchies. She navigates ambiguity only clandestinely and allows the sex, class and race-based system to define her, seeing the same things from the same view and never risking reinvention. Her emotions suffer because of this, forcing her to reinvent *them* instead by seeking pleasure in pain.

We find out via past tense flashbacks that at nineteen Clemencia began an affair with her teacher, a wealthy married man named Drew who “looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours. My skin dark against yours. Beautiful, you said. You said I was beautiful, and when you said it, Drew, I was,” (74). In this last line Clemencia allows Drew to define her and admits she’d be a have-not without his insistence concerning beauty. The beginning three sentences are an allusion to another Mexican legend: that of *La Malinche*, an Aztec woman Hernán Cortés captured and had a sexual relationship with. Shannon Wilson writes, “While in the possession of Cortez, Malinche proved to be helpful as a translator[.] [...] The people of Mexico saw her as a traitor because they believed that it was through her translations that Cortez was able to take Mexico from its indigenous people,” (41). Clemencia apparently notices her similarities with *la Malinche*, yet doesn’t seek or find a way to change herself within the story and claim emotional power back, instead remaining trapped in memory because the affair brought her self-esteem. “*Malinalli*, you called me, remember? *Mi doradita*. I liked when you spoke to me in my language. I could love myself and think myself worth loving,” (74). She goes so far that her

concept of self-love is controlled by the man in power, and she speaks directly to Drew throughout most of the story as if his attention is the only attention worth holding.

Clemencia's anguish sets in when she's confronted in an art gallery with Drew's wife, Clemencia's antithesis and threat to her self-appreciation as defined by Drew's regard for her. "And in that instant I felt as if everyone in the room, all the sepia-toned photographs, my students, the men in business suits, the high-heeled women, the security guards, everyone, could see me for what I was," she says, the long list of high-class paraphernalia hammering in how out of place Clemencia feels. She can't feel worth loving if Drew loves someone else. "And I don't know why, but all of a sudden I looked at my shoes and felt ashamed at how old they looked," (79). Her aversion to name what she's thinking— "what I was" *what?* and "I don't know why"—shows that she's still too afraid and embarrassed to publicly acknowledge her sociological status for fear of the power it denies her. Michael Carroll and Susan Naramore Maher put it perfectly: "[Cisneros's heroines] are attuned to the eyes that watch, judge, and deny their presence: mothers' eyes that tell a daughter to reject her own kind and lovers' eyes that eagerly consume the dark skin of a Mexican woman while reviling her status in larger society. Under the burden of such gazes, Clemencia shrinks into passive aggression," (9). Toward the end of the story, Clemencia admits to sleeping with Drew's teenage son and hiding gummy bears in Drew's wife's makeup, feeding the twisted emotions she's come to harbor: "It's always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that, without their knowing it," (76–77). Her target should be Drew, not the son or wife, but it's a safer bet to attack them instead of calling out the man atop the pyramid. Clemencia shields herself by positively reinforcing negative feelings/actions; clearly there's little hope for her true happiness.

Out of Cisneros's three heroines explored in this essay, Lupe from "*Bien Pretty*" channels the most perseverance. She traverses her cross-class, cross-cultural world and reaches elation at the end of her story, which also marks a triumphant end to the whole collection. "Rather than retreat into her past and accept the injustices of life as a *Mestiza*, she risks connection and change[.]" Carroll and Maher write in comparing Clemencia with Lupe (11). An enlightening relationship between Lupe and impoverished Mexican immigrant Flavio Munguía brings about a majority of this connection and change. Lupe, who's just moved to San Antonio (the same city Cisneros lived in while writing this collection) from California, is a middle-class artist house-sitting for upper-class socialites, and a lot of her interests derive from cultures that aren't necessarily her own and concepts that aren't necessarily down-to-earth. For example, after hiring Flavio as a model the two have the following conversation:

I was explaining yin and yang. How sexual harmony put one in communion with the infinite forces of nature. [...]

"Ah," said Flavio, "like the *mexicano* word 'sky-earth' for the world."

"Where the hell did you learn that? The *Popul Vuh*?"

"No," Flavio said flatly. "My grandma Oralia," (Cisneros 149).

Flavio's stories prove to Lupe that cultural symbols and ideas, especially Chicano ones, aren't so ancient or impersonal. His character "[embraces] his skin, his culture, and his work with confidence," (Carroll and Maher 12). This confidence frustrates Lupe but also influences her to interact more with her heritage: "I wanted to leap across the table, throw the Oaxacan black pottery pieces across the room, swing from the punched tin chandelier, fire a pistol at his Reeboks, and force him to dance. I wanted to *be* Mexican at that moment, but it was true. I was not Mexican," (Cisneros 151). When she and Flavio declare their connection in the form of sex, Lupe feels "[i]ncredible happiness," as "a groan heaved out from my chest so rusty and full of dust it frightened me. I was crying. It surprised us both," (154). This waterfall of emotions catalyzes Lupe's developing Chicana consciousness.

But let's not forget the anguish! When Flavio breaks up with Lupe to move back to Mexico, her initial grief paralyzes her. She ignores what he's saying to focus on a sick dog outside of the restaurant they've visited, which is a clever representation of her mental state on Cisneros's part. Referring to the dog literally but herself metaphorically, Lupe says, "Somebody must've felt sorry for it and tossed it a last meal, but the kind thing would've been to shoot it," (156). This subtle wish for death shows heartbreak just as much as a physical description—"I let the sounds, dark and full of dust and hairs, out of my throat and eyes, that sound mixed with spit and coughing and hiccups and bubbles of snot" (158)—but doesn't last forever. She works through the pain, determined not to let it fester like Clemencia or depress her like Cleófilas. She fights the pain. "After a few days I'm watching the *telenovelas*. Avoiding board meetings, rushing home from work, stopping at Torres Taco Haven on the way and buying taquitos to go. [...] And in my dreams I'm slapping the heroine to her senses, because I want them to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to," (161). Lupe takes emotional refuge in consuming more Chicana culture, therefore connecting more with herself rather than dwelling on the past or a man; her feminist focus confirms she's being critical of that culture as she embraces it, just as Cisneros advises. In an indirect response to the caricatures of Chicanas in earlier "Woman Hollering Creek" stories, Lupe says, "Not men powerful and passionate versus women either volatile or evil, or sweet and resigned. But women. Real women. [...] *Las girlfriends. Las comadres*. Our mamas and *tías*. Passionate *and* powerful, tender and volatile, brave. And, above all, fierce," (161). The positively-connoted adjectives attached to figures that Lupe's known all her life, plus the coexistence of Spanish tidbits, convey her deeper, developed understanding and appreciation for what makes her herself.

Scenes and events evoke this epiphany too, not just thought in prose. Lupe talks with a Latina woman at a grocery store about the *telenovelas*; Lupe visits a Mexican religious store for healing “powders,” (158). She even reimagines a painting she was working on involving an Aztec tragic love story, but decides that “Prince Popo and Princess Ixta trade places. After all who’s to say the sleeping mountain isn’t the prince, and the voyeur the princess, right? So I’ve done it my way,” (163). Again reversing power roles in legend like Felice, again exercising agency “my way” to prove she’s worked *through* the anguish poured upon her by others and come out swinging. During the last beat in the story, Lupe watches a flock of *urraca* birds take flight, squawking “with no thought of the future or past. Today. Hurray. Hurray!” (165). The onward and upward image of the birds—another metaphor for cultural exploration—summons hope to the reader. “Today. Hurray. Hurray!” celebrates what Lupe’s overcome, but more importantly, celebrates the robust mindset she’s earned to use in the exciting, ambiguous present.

In this essay we’ve learned that anguish is a fundamental component of the Chicana experience in Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories.” This anguish is encouraged by economic classing, ethnic grouping, myth and legend, and overall male-dominated Chicano culture. Clemencia from “Never Marry a Mexican” remains in anguish by refusing to take advantage of her ambiguous identity or stake claim to a constructive part of it. Cleófilas from “Woman Hollering Creek” is given an example—Felice—as a tool to begin to fight the system of anguish, but doesn’t do so herself on-page. It’s Lupe in “*Bien Pretty*” who turns anguish into celebration because she understands the importance of navigation by redefinition. Sandra Cisneros teaches us to evaluate our own cultures, reevaluate ourselves within them, and spread the happiness that consciousness births.

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