

**"THE DARKNESS UNDER THE TREES": CHICANA WRITERS'
RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

THESIS

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by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE CHICANA WRITER'S EXPERIENCE

Over the last few decades, Chicana writing has gained recognition in the literary world and beyond, emerging as a form of social commentary and as a catalyst for furthering multicultural understanding. Due to the efforts of writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, and Ana Castillo, Chicana literature maintains a respectable presence in society while constantly challenging traditional ideas and examining issues facing readers today. Throughout works falling under this category, the ever-present problem of violence against women appears again and again, suggesting its influence upon the Chicana experience and the need for a continued dialogue on the subject. Fueled by established cultural norms and specific instances of violence making headlines today, Chicana writers are raising awareness of this delicate topic throughout their work, thus shedding light upon the reality of life for many women in the United States and Mexico.

Though violence against women is gaining understanding as an international epidemic, much work remains to be completed before this issue is eradicated forever. Thus, human rights advocates and politicians continue to seek social, political, and economic change in an effort to provide equal opportunities for the citizens of this world. Alongside these activists, artists and writers are also illuminating the atrocities of this violence, utilizing their works to influence change among their patrons and readers. It is

in this manner that Chicana authors have emerged as leaders within the movement, as they strive to achieve understanding while illuminating the problems that threaten the survival of their subjects. As literary critics, essayists, poets, and storytellers, Chicana writers move beyond the notion of authors as entertainers and educators; for, it must be argued, they possess the same qualities and unstoppable drive as human rights workers, becoming counselors and activists in their quest to change the world forever, one piece at a time.

If the statistics of a United Nations Children's Fund report, which found that “at least one in three women and girls worldwide has been beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime,” are any indication, then the severity of this crisis is staggering (Curphey 2). The same report also found that, of the 193 countries in the world, only 44 currently maintain laws of any kind against domestic abuse; and of these nations, only 17 outlaw marital rape (Curphey 2). Thus, the odds of a female from any country becoming the victim of abuse, at some time during her life, are remarkably high.

Discouraged with statistics like these, many human rights groups are taking steps to end violence against women in all of its manifestations, from spousal abuse to mistreatment at the hands of occupying military forces. Yet before this crisis can be eliminated, it first must be recognized as an enduring threat to half of the world's population. In 2004, Amnesty International began a campaign aimed at evaluating “violence against women as a human rights violation” (Curphey 1). With this label, violent crimes committed against women will carry harsher penalties and longer prison sentences, and the organization hopes to earn the support of the world's nations. Several years before this current campaign began, Amnesty International “declared that domestic violence, when combined with state inaction, is torture,” thus instilling a sense of

culpability within the countries that continue to ignore this devastating reality (Curphey 1).

Echoing the sentiments of Amnesty International, the United Nations “declared that gender-based violence, including violence committed by private individuals, is a form of discrimination that states must take measures to eradicate” (Curphey 2). The United Nations Human Rights Committee then specified that all states must act to protect their citizens from torture, “whether inflicted by governments or non-state actors” (Curphey 2). The efforts of the United Nations continue almost ceaselessly, and in 1993, its General Assembly adopted the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*, requiring countries “to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate, and punish gender violence” (Curphey 2). That same year, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna declared that governments are bound by duty to their citizens to end domestic violence; and two years later, the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women passed the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, stating that domestic violence is, indeed, a violation of basic human rights (Curphey 2).

All of these declarations and amendments are encouraging, yet the fact remains that the organizations creating these treaties have little, if any, power to actually enforce them. While the United Nations committees do mandate that countries make efforts to follow the guidelines, “Amnesty International and other human rights groups work through U.N. oversight committees and in the court of public opinion to compel states to match their human rights rhetoric with action to protect women from violence” (Curphey 3). Therefore, enforcement of these strategies is not guaranteed, especially when “the court of public opinion” fails to acknowledge that a crime has been committed.

Because Chicana writers must overcome issues of race, gender, and recognition in

their search for acceptance in the societies of Mexico and the United States, as well as in the larger literary world, they excel as leaders of a grassroots movement striving to improve the lives of women across the world. As members of a culture still fighting against racism, of a gender still seeking equality, and of a profession still working for respect and recognition, these artists shoulder the burdens of the underrepresented and ignored, becoming the voices of the silent members of society. Fueled largely by their own experiences as Chicana writers, and frustrated by the current situation of their own environments, these authors become advocates for an entire population desperately seeking the promise of change and the possibility of improvement.

Through their continuous efforts, Chicana writers are improving the situation of the culture and gender to which they belong, yet their influence extends far beyond these categories, reaching larger groups also desiring change in specific areas of their lives. These writers ultimately succeed in furthering the understanding of all who seek to end violence against women. By evaluating their own experiences and motivations, these women authors reveal the harsh reality of life for many of their readers and others throughout the world. Through their diligence, and the careful understanding of their readers, Chicana writers are transforming modern society as they speak out against injustices plaguing all populations.

At the head of this movement to stop violence against women is the Chicana literary presence, a group of talented authors striving for acceptance while illuminating the very ideas that seek to silence them. Yet before these issues of violence facing our world's female population can be examined, with the hope of eventually eradicating them completely, the obstacles faced by Chicana writers, as strong advocates for a silent group, must be understood. It is only because they themselves survive racism and sexism in the

search for professional respect that these women are able to recognize thoroughly the victimization of others. As survivors, they bring to the page an established sense of authority and are, therefore, successful at recreating the stories of their subjects. Their own experiences, as Chicanas, as women, and as writers, compel them to speak for the voiceless, yet their stories of survival further strengthen the power of their words.

The Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska defines the essence of the Chicana author's experience in the United States and addresses the obstacles faced by these women as they voice the concerns of their readers in her 1991 lecture, "Mexicanas and Chicanas."

Poniatowska defines *Chicano* as "not only designated people of Mexican ancestry living in the United States, but also the social and racial discrimination, the economic exploitation of a migrant class which crossed the Rio Grande looking for a better life" (37). As members of this group, Chicana writers must tread lightly upon the metaphorical border which divides the cultures seeking to define their lives, while shunning them for failing to assimilate completely.

Simply because they were born female, these writers experience the devastation of sexism combined with the confusion of two extremely different cultural systems attempting to influence their place as women in modern society. Though this struggle is common among many multicultural individuals, Chicanas face the burden of double subjugation as minority women, for "they [are] subject to sex, race, and class discrimination, to the ill treatment of machos because they are female, to the inferiority complex that accompanies every woman in a patriarchal society and in which the sex roles are established since birth" (Poniatowska 43). Add to this equation the desire for recognition as a writer, and Chicana authors simply continue to endure more hardship and inequity in an exclusive field filled with preconceived ideas dominated by an established

canon of works.

As a writer and journalist herself, Poniatowska explains the Chicana author's dilemma: "To be a Chicano is not easy, but to be a Chicana is even harder. To be a writer in Mexico is not easy, but to be a woman writer sometimes makes no sense at all. A Chicana writer in the United States gets the worst of both conditions: being a woman and a Chicana aspiring to become a writer" (43). Poniatowska further examines the discrimination experienced by Chicana writers and, quite surprisingly, faults Mexican women authors, a category to which she belongs, for perpetuating the feelings of racism still at issue today. Revealing that, "Even now, very few Mexican writers care for Chicano writers and poets, and even fewer women writers take Chicana writers into account," Poniatowska divulges the hypocrisy of her contemporaries and acknowledges the need for a thorough examination of Chicana writers' works (38). Realizing that "our ignorance of Chicano women writers is particularly unfair when we Mexican women writers always complain that no one takes us seriously," Poniatowska admits, "what is done to us, we do" (46). Though she blames "mere ignorance and an official dismissal of a culture split in two," the author believes that "this whole feeling of superiority will quickly change into an inferiority complex" upon closer study of Chicana authors (45).

The individual struggles of Chicana writers strengthen the power of their words and add credence to the lessons of bravery and survival found within their pages. Because they know first-hand the depths of misery and despair, these women are able to emerge successfully, for "when man or woman reaches the bottom of the pit, his and her efforts in coming out are priceless" (Poniatowska 44). Dissecting the issues of racism, sexism, and segregation that threaten to destroy entire populations across the world, Chicana

writers are establishing their permanent presence within the literary realm and beyond, providing an opportunity to examine the effects of oppression in the twenty-first century. Thus it is their sense of accomplishment and newly achieved empowerment that pervades the writing of Chicana authors, lending them the credibility needed to grapple with serious social issues. Overcoming the obstacles placed in front of them from birth, these writers are now able to share their success with others while also aiding in the struggle for equality. Strengthened by their past and encouraged by their own roles as survivors, they are paving the way for others through sheer determination and fearlessness.

Though the stories change slightly from author to author, as do the characters, the messages implied, from suffering and survival to fear and defeat, are remarkably similar. Interestingly, many of the female characters remain silent, often prevented from telling their stories to parents, friends, teachers, or any available ear. Yet we as readers know what ultimately transpires due to the courage of the writers; thus, the experiences of their subjects are not ignored, but fully revealed in an effort to further our own understanding of violence's impact upon the lives of many. In this way, Chicana writers fully transcend their positions as storytellers and take on their true roles as counselors and activists, addressing the crisis plaguing modern society while also establishing the possibility of survival.

From here, the responsibility of ending this type of violence falls largely into the hands of concerned citizens willing to voice their opinions vocally, as many Chicana writers successfully do. By drawing attention to this crime within their literature, these women further the examination of the problem at hand, picking up where international organizations leave off. Thus, Chicana authors assume the same responsibilities as human rights advocates, literally becoming the voices for those who cannot speak for

themselves. Focusing largely upon the experiences of women in Mexico and the southwestern part of the United States, Chicana writers recount tales of sexual molestation and torture of young girls at the hands of their fathers, stepfathers, and uncles, as well as the physical and emotional abuse of wives by their husbands, girlfriends by their boyfriends, and, less frequently, victims by complete strangers.

Within their stories, these writers shed light upon the reality of their characters' lives while also educating readers not familiar with the issues accompanying violence against women. Because, in many instances, Chicana authors were, at one time, also victims, they easily empathize with the subjects of their pieces and serve as counselors for their characters and readers, leading all of us toward the promise of understanding. Though they write largely for a Chicana audience, the accessibility of the stories allows a larger readership to participate in the discussion taking place. Through dramatic details, these writers describe the victimization of their characters while arming readers with the compassion needed to grasp the severity of these crimes. Many of the tales utilize a very casual approach to both dialogue and narration, creating a sense of friendly conversation, as if the narrator is speaking to her readers from the comfort of her front porch. Similarly, Chicana writers often employ a diverse mix of English and Spanish language that welcomes Spanish readers while remaining clear enough for English-only readers to follow the storyline. Through these techniques, Chicana writers successfully gain the trust of all readers, comforting those familiar with the horror of abuse while establishing a greater understanding within the minds of those seeking to learn more about violence's grasp upon women in society in an effort to end its power forever.

In a similar manner, Chicana authors take on the burdens of activists, raising awareness of this issue through their writing. Frustrated by the lack of society's

involvement, both socially and politically, the artists are ripping statistics from today's headlines and transforming them into the subjects of their stories, thus giving identities to the nameless sea of victims affected by violence daily. Bravely commenting upon this issue, Chicana writers are taking matters into their own hands and assuming the responsibility themselves. By reclaiming the ancient myth of La Llorona as a symbol of enduring strength and courage, the authors are redefining society's perceptions of Chicanas and establishing the possibility of survival within a tale once associated only with suffering and death. In this way, Chicana writers lend their voices to those once silenced forever, trading in their tears while screaming loudly for cultural understanding and recognition.

Refusing to be silent in the face of such atrocities occurring constantly, these women writers reconstruct the horrific details of their readers' lives upon the pages of their works, sparing no detail or image along the way. Just as investigative reporters recount specific events for newspapers and magazines, these authors utilize their knowledge of the world to recreate realistic experiences for their characters, establishing situations similar to those incurred by our mothers, sisters, friends, and often, ourselves. As accessible to the reader as articles from popular periodicals, these tales illustrate the problems plaguing modern society and all of its cultures, as issues of poverty, racism, and violence transcend borders and impact victims across the world. Through their own courageous investigations of these atrocities, Chicana writers are educating their readers while striving to improve forever the lives of their subjects.

The stories within Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* and *The House on Mango Street*, Helena María Viramontes's *The Moths*, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *The Mystery of Survival*, Rocky Gámez's *The Gloria Stories*, and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Prietita y*

La Llorona provide a deeper understanding of the issues impacting women across the world while also demonstrating the talent and concern of the writers. Thus, their works endure as testaments to the movement seeking to end violence against women and also to the strength and determination that come with the desire to survive. Overcoming many obstacles themselves in the search for literary recognition and acceptance, Chicana writers pave the way for all individuals seeking to change the circumstances of the world around them. Through fierce resistance to oppression and persecution, these authors are establishing new possibilities for their subjects and readers while working ceaselessly to stop the violence plaguing modern society.

CHAPTER II

THE ARTIST AS COUNSELOR: INSTANCES OF VIOLENCE

Because Chicanas surmount great obstacles along their paths as writers, they easily assume roles as counselors, guiding their readers toward the possibility of survival and the promise of hope that accompanies it. Burdened by their concerns, as they speak for voiceless victims while also educating general readers seeking knowledge of the Chicana experience, these writers employ useful literary techniques in an effort to reach the largest audience. By sharing their own observations, thus furthering the relationship between writer and reader, the authors strengthen the bond of trust, making a continued dialogue possible. Through graphically detailed scenes of abuse, the reality of violence for many women is revealed in dialogue and description, often narrated by the victims themselves. This method provides the reader with a first-hand account of the character's experiences while also establishing the beginnings of a conversation focused solely upon the severity of violence against women. Thus, as the writers establish the presence of danger in their subjects' lives, they also take steps to assure readers' understanding of the circumstances, all the while moving closer to the promise of survival.

Though most Chicana authors write with Chicana readers in mind, they provide tales accessible to all readers of different cultural groups. The majority of Chicana writers' characters are also Chicana, yet their experiences and observations are shared by readers of both genders and many cultures across the world, giving these stories a

universal appeal. At the same time, the works of Chicana authors provide enough insight and explanation into Chicano culture to include readers of other cultures in the discussion taking place. Ultimately, readers of Chicana literature come away with a better understanding of issues facing modern Chicanas while also comprehending the importance of a continued discussion in the unending quest for acceptance of all individuals.

The most noticeable technique used by Chicana authors seeking to counsel their readers and subjects is the interweaving of both Spanish and English within the text of their stories. While this method characterizes Chicana writing, the writers successfully engage English-only readers with their techniques while welcoming bilingual readers through a dialect familiar to residents of the United States. In such a way, the authors establish a casual approach to the important messages of their stories and present the implications of these events to their readers in a careful, non-judgmental manner. Combining the beauty of two languages with dramatic descriptions and universal appeal, the writers of these works ultimately succeed in gaining their readers' trust while illuminating the crisis of violence plaguing many communities across the United States and the world. As compassionate counselors seeking to influence subjects and readers alike, these authors achieve their purpose through the power of their words, providing much more than entertainment while educating those concerned with the issues plaguing our society.

The issue of language figures heavily into the writings of Chicana authors, yet unlike many instances of multicultural expression which exclude outside readers or viewers, the works of these women achieve a true sense of harmony through their complete accessibility. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains within *Borderlands/La Frontera*:

The New Mestiza,

There is no one Chicana language just as there is no one Chicano experience. A monolingual Chicana whose first language is English or Spanish is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several varieties of Spanish. A Chicana from Michigan or Chicago or Detroit is just as much a Chicana as one from the Southwest. Chicano Spanish is as diverse linguistically as it is regionally.

(252)

While English may be the most natural choice for Chicana writers hoping to reach a larger audience, it fails to capture the beauty and subtle nuances of traditional Spanish phrases and expressions often employed by Chicanos in the United States. Yet utilizing only Spanish would potentially exclude some Chicana readers while also preventing interested readers of other cultures from gaining information about the effects of violence against women. Instead, through a mix of the two languages, Chicana writers welcome all readers and actively engage them within a discussion dedicated to ending forever the crisis of violence. Continuing their desire for true understanding among all cultures, Chicana authors also reclaim both languages as their own, debunking the ever-present debate regarding the institution of an official language; thus, bilingual readers experience the works in much the same way as they are accustomed to speaking, while monolingual readers gain access to unfamiliar words through the careful placement of italics and explanatory clauses.

Harryette Mullen, of the University of California, Los Angeles, examines the issue of language within her article, "A Silence Between Us Like a Language': Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*." Utilizing the famous story collection as a reference point, Mullen ponders Cisneros's mixture of Spanish and English and its effects upon

readers of the tales. It is this specific trait, the interweaving of Spanish and English, that welcomes both bilingual and monolingual readers, yet Mullen also suggests the dual role of Spanish, as it “operates both as an insider code comprehensible to some but not others, and also as a repressed language in its subordination to English as the dominant language in the U.S.” (4). The use of Spanish, as Mullen suggests, addresses the issues of repression experienced by Chicanos within the United States and allows the often subordinated language to take center stage through its ability to capture the feelings of the characters. Thus, the author's intentions serve two purposes, establishing the undeniable presence of Spanish as a common language of this country while also using it to gain the confidence of both monolingual and bilingual readers.

Through “this new literacy...which embraces elements excluded by the dominant standardized languages used in Mexico and the U.S.,” the voices of the silent are finally heard, and their concerns are easily expressed through the beauty of their own dialect (5). Perhaps it is this basic characteristic of Chicana writing, the interweaving of familiar language that draws readers in, as if participating in a conversation, that provides the opportunity to examine difficult issues affecting modern Chicanas. By gaining their readers' trust, first through informal dialogue and comfortable chatter, these authors proceed to broach more delicate and often painful subjects, thus forcing readers to face fully the darker side of life.

The difficult reality of violence is approached by Chicana authors through their use of detail and familiar language, thus easing readers into a close examination of the problems faced by the stories' characters. Guided into the depths of a private conversation among friends, readers then become privy to the most personal perceptions offered by the subjects, as they seek to gain understanding of their own experiences. This

method is utilized by Sandra Cisneros and other Chicana authors specifically in reference to acts of violence affecting their characters. While the stories unfold, the writers gently push their readers into the middle of each incident, providing a first-hand account of the experiences while instilling a deeper understanding of suffering within us.

As she explains in her article, Mullen focuses upon Cisneros's female subjects, "all attempt[ing] to escape narrow constraints defining women's experiences...They are the wayward and wandering ones, whose names are mentioned in gossip, tabloid headlines, and prayers" (7). With this characterization, also employed by Helena Maria Viramontes and Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Cisneros creates an everywoman, someone familiar to all readers, yet removed enough to be pitied or admired. As Mullen explains, "*Woman Hollering Creek* offers stories of a variety of women trying various means of escape, through resistance to traditional female socialization, through sexual and economic independence, self-fashioning, and feminist activism, as well as through fantasy, prayer, magic, and art" (8). The wide range of characters provide points of interest for all readers, and in her large collection of stories, there is undoubtedly one subject who touches each reader in a meaningful way. Cisneros embraces every possible aspect of female existence and creates dynamically round characters realistic enough to remind us of friends or acquaintances. In her attempt to include all individuals seeking knowledge and insight regarding the issues she examines, Cisneros draws readers further into her narration through these women, many of whom possess qualities we desire to obtain, while others seem destined for destruction from the opening lines. Whatever the case may be, all of Cisneros's female characters retain readers' attention throughout the course of each tale and lead us toward a resolution as they search for a happy ending.

Cisneros, Mullen argues, lends her voice to those previously ignored, "the silenced

and marginalized, including children, homosexuals, and working class and immigrant Chicanos and Mexicanos, whose stories have been untold or untranslated” (11). Thus, the stories exist as works of fiction, but also as social and political commentary revealing the harsh realities of life for Cisneros's subjects and readers. These tales, Mullen asserts, “draw the readers' attention...to tensions within Latino communities, of race, class, gender, and ideology; and of unequal access to education, bilingual instruction, literacy, class mobility, and the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship” (16). Again, Cisneros firmly grasps readers' awareness, first through her casual narration, then with the appeal of her realistic characters, before finally addressing the focus of her writing and the concerns she carries for the Chicano community. Refusing to let go before a clear point is made, Cisneros gently pulls readers through the experiences of her subjects while counseling us along the way; thus, we reach a better understanding of these defining moments in the lives of her characters simultaneously with them. The result is a moment of insight shared by both reader and subject that remains in our minds long after the story ends.

Cisneros specifically examines these tensions and addresses the prevalence of violence against women within “One Holy Night” from *Woman Hollering Creek*. As do many subjects within her collections, Cisneros's main character narrates this story in first-person, thus establishing a confidence with the reader that lends a sense of familiarity to the entire account. Repeatedly referring to readers as “you,” the narrator speaks directly to us while sharing the most personal details of her seduction and subsequent pregnancy, admitting, “what I'm telling you I never told nobody,” with the first lines of the story's opening (Cisneros 27). Establishing this confidentiality from the beginning, Cisneros allows her subject to relate these experiences honestly, and without fear of judgment,

because she maintains her anonymity throughout the course of the story, resembling a church-goer confessing to a priest from behind the protection of a wooden screen. Though she speaks for herself, in frank and honest terms, the young girl remains nameless, perhaps also symbolizing the countless victims of abuse who never get to share their experiences with those willing to listen. With this technique, Cisneros establishes her dominant female character, described by Mullen as “wayward and wandering,” in the form of an eighth-grader changed forever by the false promises of a stranger passing briefly into her life (Mullen 7). At the same time, the writer also protects her subject from the harsh criticism often accompanying stories of young women led astray, for the narrator's innocence and youth resonate within her dialogue continuously, reminding readers that she is still only a child in need of guidance and love.

After losing her virginity, “it wasn’t a big deal. It wasn’t any deal at all,” to “Chaq Uxmal Paloquín...of an ancient line of Mayan kings,” the speaker becomes pregnant and is forced to leave school, eventually relocating to Mexico as her pregnancy progresses (Cisneros 27-28). Through her narration, the young girl's true innocence is revealed, and she easily becomes the latest victim of Chato Cruz, as he seduces her with romantic notions of ancient times, promising to “love [her] like a revolution, like a religion” (27). When the pregnancy is discovered by the girl's grandmother, “Chaq” is long gone, leaving behind only a letter from a convent in Mexico as a clue to his true identity.

As the girl comes to terms with her new role, finally “[understanding] why Abuelita didn't let me sleep over at Lourdes's house full of too many brothers,...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 *M* or *F* on in the test we get at school,” the grandmother struggles to find the man responsible for her granddaughter's condition (30-31). It is only

after her “uniform [gets] tight around [her] belly” that she is sent to a town in Mexico “where I was conceived and would've been born had my grandma not thought it wise to send my mother here to the United States so that neighbors...wouldn't ask why her belly was suddenly big” (33). Thus, the young narrator finds herself in the same position once held by her own mother, now absent, as a single, pregnant girl roaming from place to place, at the mercy of relatives willing to take her in.

The reality of her situation and the narrowness by which she escapes come to light after her grandmother receives a response from the convent address on the letter in Chaq's room. Writing to the grandmother, Chato Cruz's youngest sister, a Carmelite nun, reveals the truth regarding her deviant brother, “Boy Baby is thirty-seven years old. His name is Chato which means fat-face. There is no Mayan blood” (33). Soon after, Chato appears in newspaper clippings from Mexico, and the horror of his actions is understood in pieces provided by the narrator, “a picture of him looking very much like stone, police hooked on either arm...*on the road to Las Gritas de Xtacumbilxuna, the Caves of the Hidden Girl...eleven female bodies...the last seven years...*” (34). Shocked and in complete disbelief, the young girl can only “stare at the little black-and-white dots that make up the face I am in love with” (34).

And this sense of denial eventually hardens the narrator into a bitter young woman, awaiting the birth of the child that, already, “will not let me rest” (34). For this nameless girl, there is no reprieve, only the knowledge that comes with the truth of pain. When questioned about love by her younger female cousins, the narrator can only respond, “It's a bad joke. When you find out you'll be sorry,” because, certainly, she is (35). At this early age, when many young girls still “[jump] into their stupid little hopscotch squares,” the narrator can only wait for the new life that is to come, already knowing that it “will

always be hard” (31, 35).

Sadly, this young narrator possesses little chance of future happiness, unless she can escape the experiences of her past and overcome the disappointment of her first love. Thanks to the efforts of her grandmother, the girl survives and does not become another body lying in a remote cave, yet her prospects are uncertain with the story's end. Here, Cisneros assumes the advocate's role of counselor, revealing the truth of Chato's identity through the grandmother's determination while also addressing the uncertainty of the entire situation with the jaded responses of the young woman. This character faces a life of difficulty and is not guaranteed a happy ending, a fact she realizes quite clearly. Yet she refuses to suffer silently and willingly shares her experiences with interested cousins and curious neighbors, as well as with readers, providing a survivor's account of a possibly tragic event. Here, through the courage of her young narrator, Cisneros begins to address the possibility of survival for the young girl, providing her with the insight needed to chart her own course in the future.

Though Cisneros's story ends less than happily, readers are comforted by the young girl's survival and her apparent understanding of this significantly life-changing event. As the narrator matures from an innocent child into a cynical mother-to-be, the author documents this change through her character's monologue, revealing the sad transformation of a girl who “took the crooked walk” (28). Cisneros depicts her compassion for her subject, and, thus, for all women in similar situations, through this technique and clearly demonstrates her position as a counselor, passing no judgment while allowing the victim to come to her own conclusions. The writer reaches out to her readers and successfully holds our attention throughout the entire piece, relying upon the narrator's confiding tone to draw us into a circle of understanding too difficult to share

with the entire world, for “what I’m telling you I never told nobody, except for Rachel and Lourdes, who know everything” (28). With this admission, Cisneros’s readers are elevated to positions of confidants and we become privy to the innermost thoughts of a damaged young woman. Assuming this role as the author assumes her place as counselor, readers of “One Holy Night” understand the delicate issues examined within the piece and the narrator’s need to share her observations, in an effort to explain her current state while warning others “how it is to be a girl” (34). As an effective counselor, Cisneros allows her subject to do the talking, and the young woman eventually comes to her own understanding of this difficult ordeal, honestly sharing her experience with readers along the way.

Similarly, the narrator’s use of Spanish, and also the Mayan phrases spoken by the perpetrator, contribute to the issues of oppression and subordination Mullen explores in her article and Cisneros addresses throughout the story. Perhaps exhausted by his life of poverty and ceaseless despair, Chato Cruz hopes to achieve his perceived position among “Mayan kings” and dreams of reclaiming “the grandeur of [his] people from those who have broken the arrows, from those who have pushed the ancient stones off their pedestals” (27, 29). Unable to ignite a revolution, Cruz preys upon young girls instead, choosing victims also subjugated by the lack of opportunities available. In this manner, he takes control of his own helplessness and lures inexperienced children into his web with false promises of romance and magic not demonstrated since the age of the Mayan Empire.

Talking in “his strange language that no one could understand,” the rapist and murderer seduces his victims easily while addressing his own feelings of uncertainty and frustration, emotions he cannot overcome. Thus, the Mayan he utters, or at least purports

to speak fluently, becomes sinister as the language of death, rather than the beautifully mysterious dialect it first appears to be. Cisneros also utilizes Spanish terms in association with negative images, as the grandmother calls her granddaughter a “*sinvergüenza* because [she is] without shame” for associating with “that *demonio*” (32). While translations follow the phrases, either directly or in the context of the sentence, their presence emphasizes the insider code spoken by the narrator and her circle of intimate friends, which includes the readers, while excluding the perpetrator of violence. Most of the negative phrases are in direct response to Cruz's actions, and serve as insults hurled specifically at him by his victim's family members. Thus, their anger and hurt are revealed in the purest forms of expression and cannot be ignored.

This implied familiarity with Cisneros's readers leads ultimately to a better understanding of the story's events and supplies readers with a sense of compassion that the author first demonstrates. Through her carefully crafted technique, the young narrator regains a sense of self while helping to educate others along the way. Cisneros continues her position as a counselor within “My *Tocaya*,” another story from *Woman Hollering Creek* that addresses the issue of violence while allowing the narrator to express her feelings freely. Much like “One Holy Night's” narrator, the main character within this tale maintains a jaded tone, though, in this case, her persona stems not from lasting effects of abuse, but from the common attitude of coolness demonstrated by many teenagers seeking to fit in with the world around them. What links the young narrators of both Cisneros's stories is the innocence that easily seeps through their cold exteriors, revealing the true poignancy of their experiences to readers. As characters, and most significantly, as young women recounting horrible events children should never face, their apparent facades of flippancy only serve to enhance the evil of the circumstances

described; thus, they appear more vulnerable while pretending not to care.

“My *Tocaya's*” main character is Patricia “Trish” Benavídez, a thirteen-year-old girl missing from San Antonio, Texas, while the narrator of the story is Patricia's *tocaya*, another character with the “same first name” (37). As Patricia tells about “Trish,” who worked at her father's taco shop, “after school and every weekend, bored, a little sad, behind the high counters where customers ate standing up like horses,” readers learn more about the daily experiences of both girls, thus understanding their roles as Chicanas coming of age in a large, urban city (37). Patricia, as the narrator, possesses the cool facade of many high school girls, and her reactions to her *tocaya's* disappearance and eventual death are almost flippant, masking the fact that both characters are more similar than Patricia cares to admit.

Speculating on Trish's whereabouts, Patricia never assumes foul play and, instead, rationalizes that she “disappeared from a life sentence at that taco house. Got tired of coming home stinking of crispy tacos” (37). Patricia also hints at the possibility of abuse occurring within the Benavídez household, admitting that Trish's job “wasn't enough to make me feel sorry for her, even if her father *was* mean” (37). The narrator reveals a small amount of compassion when referring to this possibility and adds, “Who knows what she had to put up with. Maybe her father beat her. He beat her brother, I know that. Or at least they beat each other. It was one of the fist fights that finally did it—drove the boy off forever” (37).

Largely, Patricia expresses disappointment at Trish's absence because it prevents her from communicating with “Max Lucas Luna Luna,” a senior at their brother school who lives near the missing girl. Trish acted as a go-between for the blossoming couple; thus, her disappearance brings their only means of communication to a sudden end.

Cisneros reveals Patricia's own innocence in the same manner she treats the young girl within "One Holy Night," literally preventing the characters, from lack of insight and knowledge of life's cruelties, from seeing the complete picture. Patricia's reaction to the death of her *tocaya* is one of shock and disbelief, suggesting that she truly never considered the possibility of her classmate's murder, for "just when I could say her name again without spitting, she goes and dies. Some kids playing in a drain ditch find a body, and yeah, it's her...I couldn't help but feel bad for the dip once she's dead, right? I mean, after I got over being mad" (40). Ironically, Patricia's lack of acceptance of life's cruelties is correct in this situation, and Trish "[rises] from the dead three days later," after seeing her distraught family on television. (40). Safe after all, Patricia Benavídez "shows up at the downtown police station and says, I ain't dead," much to the frustration of the narrator, caught amidst the turmoil of her adolescent emotions (40).

Cisneros portrays the storyteller's relief through the girl's use of biting sarcasm and captures the shallowness of teenage jealousy with the statement, "All I'm saying is she couldn't even die right" (40). Thus, Patricia and Trish revert to their old relationship as *tocayas*, forgetting the fact that another young woman, similar in age and appearance, lies unidentified in the county morgue. This reality reinforces the presence of violence in the lives of so many women, and the frequency with which such events occur. Patricia Benavídez survives, only to endure perhaps more abuse at the hands of her father, while elsewhere in San Antonio, another mother mourns for her lost daughter. With this ending, Cisneros assumes the role of advocate, reminding readers of the nameless, voiceless victims found in ditches across the world, and again draws attention to the ever-present threat of violence existing for so many women.

As with the narrator from "One Holy Night," Cisneros's Patricia comes to terms

with the effects of violence only after the damage is done, though both young women survive their encounters and are therefore able to share their experiences with others. Patricia Benavídez's miraculous "resurrection" marks a return to the abusive home she fled earlier, while the eighth-grader within "One Holy Night" severs all ties with her assailant, though she carries his child. Thus, as Cisneros demonstrates, while the act of violence may be solitary and brief, its ramifications are long lasting and often alter the course of victims' lives forever. "My *Tocaya*" and "One Holy Night" both address the issue of murder, as Cisneros describes the victims of Chato Cruz hidden in a cave and the young victim originally mistaken for Patricia lying in a drainage ditch, yet the author protects her main characters and allows them to survive, though both clearly are damaged from their frightening experiences. In this manner, Cisneros warns her readers of the presence of violence within the lives of many women and depicts the very worst of possibilities, death, while giving her subjects a chance to share their stories.

"My *Tocaya's*" narrator, unlike the nameless girl of "One Holy Night," is known and also shares the same name with the young woman she describes throughout the piece. Thus, as Patricia describes the disappearance and eventual reappearance of Patricia "Trish" Benavídez, Cisneros links the two characters together in an effort to reveal their similarities as Chicana women coming of age in a dangerous time. Though the narrator appears tough, seemingly unaffected by the apparent death of her classmate, she recounts the story with enough emotion to impact readers dramatically with the tale's end. One cannot help but realize the interchangeability of the young girls' lives and circumstances, for just as Patricia, the narrator, could easily become Patricia Benavídez, the missing young woman, both characters could become the murder victim lying unknown in a ditch in San Antonio.

This frightening realization, perhaps never fully understood by the narrator herself, lends a macabre mood to the otherwise amusing vignette, and “My *Tocaya*,” with its conclusion, transforms from an entertaining glimpse of teenage angst into a warning to young women, presented by the author. In much the same manner as “One Holy Night,” the narrator of “My *Tocaya*” welcomes readers into her circle of friends and recounts the tale as if speaking to another thirteen-year-old attending “Our Lady of Sorrows High School” (38). This familiar air accomplishes the difficult task of addressing the issue of violence, again making the dialogue easier when discussed among trusted observers. Cisneros, with clever details and sarcasm possessed only by adolescents in the midst of personal rebellion, easily depicts the realistic experiences of Patricia Benavídez through the eyes of a girl too young to fully understand the implications; yet adult readers of the story come away armed with a deeper knowledge of violence's hold upon many innocent members of society.

While Cisneros implies the violence which results in death within several of her stories, the characters are never directly involved, thus shielding them from the horrors of murder, whether committed by strangers or by people close to the victims. Instead, Cisneros chooses to portray the difficulties incurred with survival, as the young victims struggle to come to terms with experiences that forever alter their lives. In the same manner, Cisneros shields herself, as a writer, from examining the motivations of a murderer, a frightening exercise which forces the author into the shoes of the perpetrator. Though she hints at the circumstances which drive an individual to harm or even kill another person, Cisneros avoids analyzing the evil inherent within these senseless crimes and presents her perpetrators as victims of oppression. Assuming a compassionate position, as she does when describing the victimization of her female characters, the

writer looks only at the issues leading up to instances of violence and implies a gradual change of a suffering human being into a cold-hearted villain capable of committing murder. Choosing to address the vulnerability of her characters, Cisneros only briefly discusses the presence of evil within her antagonists and, instead, analyzes the acts of violence themselves rather than the motivations of those who commit these crimes. Yet it cannot be denied that the author understands the horrific implications of these actions, for through her characterization of the murdered women within her stories, Cisneros pays tribute to the many voiceless victims succumbing to violence each year while also focusing upon the possibility of survival.

And while many instances of violence result in murder, inarguably the most tragic circumstance of all is often a lesser act of violence, one in which the victim survives, that carries the unbearable weight of suffering. Though she emerges from such an instance alive, a victim of abuse is far from intact, often enduring years of additional suffering, whether internally as she deals with psychological effects of the event, or outwardly, becoming the target of another abuser. In some circumstances, the victim becomes the victimizer, transforming her feelings of fear and powerlessness into anger inflicted upon others. In these instances, the authors must demonstrate extreme care and compassion, again becoming counselors to their characters and readers while aiding in their understanding of these horrible events. Rocky Gámez successfully demonstrates her role as counselor and friend to a troubled young woman within *The Gloria Stories*, a series of autobiographical sketches detailing the author's coming of age in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

In an excerpt from Gámez's *The Gloria Stories*, the author offers a first-person account of her friend's brush with the violence inside. Focusing upon Gloria throughout

the piece, Gámez relates the difficulties incurred by the main character as she struggles with her sexual identity and the desire “to be a man” (25). After falling in love with Rosita, Gloria performs an impromptu wedding ceremony while at the nuptials of a friend, “pretend[ing]...[to] kneel at the rail...and repeat[ing] the marriage vows...in our minds, of course, where nobody could hear us and be shocked” (29). Soon after, Gloria proudly announces that Rosita is pregnant, and thoroughly believes that she is responsible for the child's conception. Gámez, as a character within the excerpt and a loyal supporter of Gloria, struggles to educate her friend regarding the intricacies of the female reproductive system, and must resort to a college biology book to explain the absurdity of this statement. Here, the writer counsels her friend, who is also a character within the story, and the reader simultaneously, leading us through the confusion of fear and ignorance while arming us with the knowledge that comes with truth. While Gloria is confused by the functions of the human body, readers may struggle with the character's own suffering, and Gámez successfully establishes insight into both of these circumstances.

With the sudden realization that Rosita has fooled her, in more than one way, Gloria becomes outraged and threatens to “kill that fucking Rosita” (32). The narrator attempts to calm her friend by joking and reminding Gloria of her desire for a child, though she will not be persuaded and drives off erratically, in the midst of great anger. Here, the story ends and the resolution is not revealed, though impending violence is hinted at, brought forth by ignorance, deception, and hurt. Gámez purposely leaves her readers in suspense, though we are certain of Gloria's imminent eruption, for the author has previously instilled within us a sense of understanding.

As within Cisneros's stories, Gámez's main character, Gloria, recounts her

perceptions through first-person dialogue, though the events of the story are described through the author's personal narration. It is through Gámez's eyes that readers come to understand Gloria's sexuality and her desire to "father" a child, yet the writer also allows her best friend and story subject to speak directly to the audience regarding her experiences as a conflicted young woman coming of age in a small town. Gámez reveals her best friend's thoughts over the course of two letters written by Gloria to the author while she is away at college. In this manner, readers are exposed to Gloria's confusion before encountering her later in the story; thus, Gámez counsels us toward compassion and understanding for her friend as she struggles with self-identity and a romantic relationship marked by deceit. Though Gámez presents the selection through her own perceptions, placing herself within the text as a character and first-person narrator, she also provides Gloria with an opportunity to speak directly to the reader, including the entire context of her friend's letters within the pages of her tale. Rather than attempt to describe the colorful Gloria to her readers, for Gámez's friend is indeed a real person with feelings to consider, the writer simply presents Gloria as she is and allows us to draw our own conclusions. At the same time, we become aware of Gámez's love for her close friend and the author's desire to protect her from the harsh criticism of judgmental neighbors and misinformed townspeople. When readers finally meet Gloria, after Gámez returns home to recover from injuries sustained in a car accident, we are familiar with her habits and beliefs and can fully grasp the undercurrents of hurt and anger concealed beneath her cool facade.

Gámez hints at Gloria's sense of confusion and feelings of inferiority in her friend's letters, in which the main character reflects upon a visit to her parish priest. Seeking

comfort and support, Gloria is horrified with the priest's declaration that she is "not only an abomination in the eyes of God, but a lunatic in the eyes of Man," for desiring to marry her girlfriend in the church (29). Frustrated by this unexpected pronouncement, Gloria confides to the author that, "First I am a child of God, then when I want to do what the church commands in Her seventh sacrament, I'm an abomination. I tell you, Rocky, the older I get, the more confused I become" (29). Gámez's attempts to end her friend's confusion through knowledge of the issues at hand only push Gloria toward the anger displayed with the story's end, and in this situation, Gámez, acting as a counselor, is unable to diffuse the emotional outburst demonstrated by the main character in a moment of complete vulnerability and despair. Much like the stories by Cisneros, this tale again brings readers directly into a small circle of confidence and reveals issues not typically discussed among strangers. Just as Gámez must assume the responsibility of educating her friend, we as readers fully understand the motivations of the main character and can better grasp the implications of her anger, a task made possible through the author's careful presentation of her subject.

A similar intimation of violence resulting from fear and oppression emerges within "Neighbors," a story from Helena María Viramontes's collection, *Moths*, and, again, the author assumes the role of counselor, uncovering the details that lead to tragedy while helping her readers to comprehend this event. Like Gámez, who presents the violence produced from years of suffering and victimization, a topic Cisneros also addresses, the author of "Neighbors" depicts a tragedy erupting from the everyday goings on of a minority community marked by persecution and intolerance. Focusing upon an elderly woman, Aura Rodríguez, and her relationship with her neighbors, Viramontes details the

character's struggle with loneliness and fear as the outside world changes around her, threatening to destroy her calm solitude forever. Living a quiet life, Aura “ask[ed] no questions, assured of no want, no deep-hearted yearning other than to live out the remainder of her years without hurting anyone, including herself” (110). Sadly, the arrival of a curious woman at the doorstep of her next-door neighbor's house brings with it the very change Aura desperately seeks to avoid. Perhaps made jealous by her friend's new visitor and his subsequent lack of interest in Aura, the elderly woman suffers the wrath of the neighborhood's young men after she repeatedly calls the police to complain about their drinking and loud music. After one such incident, Aura's house becomes the target of graffiti and destruction, causing the elderly woman to fear for her life.

Convinced that her young neighbors will return to kill her, in retaliation for the arrest of their leader, Aura retrieves a gun from her basement and, quite literally, lies in wait for her attacker to come to her. This occurs, simultaneously, at the moment of her next-door neighbor's death from a heart attack, an event that sends his female visitor into hysterics, running to Aura's house for help. Hearing “running footsteps, panting...[Aura] [holds] the gun high with both hands, squeezing, tightly squeezing it as she aims at the door” (125). Though the story ends with this final scene, the implications of Aura's actions are clearly understood, and her great fear provides the factor needed to misinterpret the entire situation as an instance of danger. Sadly, two lives will be destroyed that day, for Aura has crushed her own desire, “hurting [someone], including herself” (110).

Viramontes ends the story with this climactic moment, only hinting at the inevitable pain that is to come, yet the main character's actions are irreversible, and, brought forth by the fear of further violence, they dramatically depict the cycle of

violence that dominates many lives. Sadly, this story does not have a happy ending, but is, instead, filled with images of torment and despair leading ultimately to the accidental killing at the end of the tale. In a final twist of tragic irony, Aura is no safer with the story's close and has taken the life of an innocent woman while trying to protect herself. Like Gámez's account, "Neighbors" reveals the tragedy of fear and ignorance when combined with violence, placing the weapon in the hands of another victim while leading only to more suffering.

As Gloria utilizes her newly acquired knowledge of the human body to punish her deceiving lover, Aura accidentally hurts an innocent woman while waiting to punish the young man responsible for the destruction of her home. Though she is motivated by fear, like Gloria who only desires love and acceptance, Aura fully understands the possible effects of her violent actions and consciously makes the decision to follow through with her intentions. The overwhelming sense of powerlessness, demonstrated by Gloria, Aura, and the young men abused by the police officers of the neighborhood, fuels the fire of anger and frustration, thus setting the stage for the eruption of these characters. Like Cisneros's seductive Chaq, as a victim of persecution and the inferiority accompanying racial discrimination, Aura and Gloria ultimately descend to the depths of their tormentors while relinquishing their helplessness as victims, assuming the only other role they know as long-time victims of suffering.

Though the possibility of surmounting their current situations exists for both women, as it does for Cisneros's young narrators, the obstacles placed before them are simply too difficult to overcome; thus, they fall backward into the void of suffering occupied by many victims of abuse. Gámez and Viramontes present these realistic tales in an attempt to illuminate the cyclical nature of violence's effects upon its victims, as

well as the inner strength and determination needed to successfully triumph over devastating circumstances. Cisneros's subjects maintain the innocence of youth and are assured the hope of understanding that comes with years of experience; yet they, too, run the risk of repeating the actions of others.

It is through the compassion of the writers that readers understand the implications of these tragic circumstances and the need for a continued dialogue on the subject of violence. Though stories of sadness exist in larger numbers than those with happy endings, both in the literary world and within modern society, the possibility of survival remains as an inspiration to many victims of violence, guiding them away from the destruction of their pasts and toward the freedom of their futures.

CHAPTER III

THE ARTIST AS COUNSELOR: THE PROMISE OF SURVIVAL

While it is realistic to depict the horrible effects of violence, specifically regarding innocent victims and those perpetrators once victimized themselves, stories of survival are desperately needed in the face of so much sadness and despair. Many victims of violence do emerge successfully, and though it may take years of personal struggles and immense effort to overcome their experiences, these survivors do so willingly, often in an effort to help others in similar situations. In this way, survivors of abuse are quite similar to Chicana authors struggling to speak for others while making their own stories known. As these writers search for their literary voices, fueled by the desire to address their own circumstances and those of other Chicanas, they also bring courage and strength to both subjects and readers striving to find their individual voices in the face of suffering. Continuing their roles as counselors, Chicana authors further utilize their talent as writers, still relying upon dramatic details, universal appeal, and the interweaving of Spanish and English to capture their characters' tales of emergence from devastating circumstances. Thus, Chicana writers share the experience of transcendence with their subjects and successfully lead both readers and characters toward the possibility of survival and the hope that comes with finding one's own voice.

These same issues are examined throughout the writings of Ana Castillo, and her motivations are revealed within an interview conducted by Elsa Saeta for The Society for

the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS), which appeared in the organization's Autumn 1997 journal. Castillo, a renowned poet, novelist, and critic, recounts her largely self-taught education as a writer coming of age during the 1970's, a time of great cultural change in the United States. Choosing not to attend the traditional writer's workshops favored by many authors, she instead devoured the published works of "the ones that taught me to write...writers that spoke to my experience" as a Chicana (135). Thus, she found sustenance with Toni Morrison, Anais Nin, Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Amado, and Julio Cortázar, to whom she dedicated *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, while also forming kinships with other Chicana writers including Sandra Cisneros, Cherrie Moraga, Norma Alarcón, Lucha Corpi, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano.

These relationships, Castillo explains, serve to strengthen the entire genre of Chicana literature, for though the writers differ in style and content, they are linked forever by their shared experiences, a "wealth of background that we can explore and manifest in so many ways in fiction, non-fiction, poetry, theory" (137). As writers, and, specifically, as Chicana writers recording their stories, Castillo and her contemporaries "attempt to bring together what might be loosely described as the Chicano or Chicana Diaspora on this land...That literature has to do with our reality, our perceptions of reality, and our perceptions of society in the United States as women of Mexican descent or Mexican background or Latina background" (138).

As a writer on her own terms, Castillo "acknowledge[s] that racism is a dynamic of our society, that sexism is a dynamic of our society, that in fact the particular society that we live in depends on racism, and on sexism, and on classism" (139). Echoing the sentiments of Cisneros, as expressed in Harryette Mullen's article, Castillo writes with a

target audience in mind; “when I’m writing, I’m thinking about a woman who is very much like me reading it” (140). Castillo, too, recognizes the need for more dialogue of the previously ignored “because that is the void that we have had in literature: a void in the representation in the literature of women who look and think and feel like me and who have had similar experiences in society” (140). By writing, Castillo hopes “to fill the void” while “reexamining,...questioning,...subverting,...[and] reinforcing the values of the American ideal, democracy” (140, 143).

While celebrating the “Chicana reality” she shares with other writers, Castillo also recognizes the differences that separate her from her contemporaries, for “what we’re doing is...giving first voice witness to our particular dilemmas and our particular perspective,...And they’re not the same...once we start to see the range of our voices we begin to understand that of course there isn’t one exclusive, politically correct Chicana literature” (143-144). What she does share with all Chicana writers, Castillo explains, is the undeniable fact that “we’re not just survivors...We are women who go way beyond survival...We don’t just exist...We have great faith and optimism in the future,” and that admirable trait reveals itself upon the pages of their works (148).

Castillo’s experiences as a writer searching for her place in the literary world mirror the experiences of a victim attempting to re-establish her life after escaping the confines of violence. Just as Castillo sought out her own personal form of education, choosing not to follow the prescribed path for hopeful writers, many characters within Chicana literature blaze their own trails in search of new possibilities and lives different from those previously known. Castillo eloquently captures the beauty of diversity that exists within Chicana writing and the realization that all Chicana authors are survivors in their own right, moving beyond simply existing by focusing upon the future. For Castillo and

her contemporaries, these stories are the fruits of their labor, demonstrating the understanding that comes with reflection upon past events while also seeking the endless possibilities that remain to be explored.

As Castillo asserts, many Chicanas transcend their suffering and reclaim their lives with great hope for the future; thus, it is appropriate that the subjects of Chicana writers' works also accomplish this feat. Alicia Gaspar de Alba examines the possibility of hope's emergence after much despair, and confronts the resilience of the human spirit within "The Mystery of Survival," the title story from her collection. Narrated in the first-person voice of a ten-year-old girl, who again remains nameless like so many victims of sexual abuse, Gaspar de Alba recounts her character's violation at the hands of her stepfather, who "told [her] once that women were like the earth, and that men could mine them and take anything they wanted" (9). After physically and sexually abusing her, the man orders her out of his home, forcing the girl and her mother to flee to a cousin's house in the colonias of Juárez, Mexico. This event, which marks the beginning of the young girl's transformation from victim to survivor, foreshadows the possibility of hope which appears later within the story. Gaspar de Alba also assures readers of the main character's future happiness with the tale's title, thus lessening the blow, if only slightly, as the subject reveals her experiences of suffering in an open and honest tone.

As the young narrator travels with her mother, she worries about the presence of other men, whom she perceives as possible perpetrators of yet more abuse and torment. Comforted by her mother, the girl takes to heart the advice given, remembering that, "the mystery of survival is obedience. If we can obey even the most terrible thing, we will survive it. If we disobey, we will always lose. Remember that. Obey and you will survive. Disobey and you will suffer" (9). Eventually, the girl is left in the care of her

cousin as her mother seeks employment in El Paso, or possibly returns to her husband in the interior part of the country, as she has done before. Though the young narrator's future is uncertain, her mother's words ring loudly in her ears, as she and her cousin march up a steep hill to meet Doña Inés, the local teacher who “makes paper out of rags...and knows English, too” (18). As the story ends, the young girl and her companion stand before a symbolic image, “Escuela la Gran Maria,” and the author hints at the possibility of an improved life through the power of knowledge. While Gaspar de Alba's assertions are far from obvious, she demonstrates the narrator's own resilience, and the power of an emerging voice for all of the female residents of the colonias is implied, instilling a sense of survival within her characters and readers, alike.

Through her subtlety, a common characteristic of the author's work, Gaspar de Alba examines survival as a certainty, refusing to entertain other outcomes at all. Utilizing this technique, the author provides only small intimations of details, including the mother's frequent absences from her daughter's life and the school mentioned only on the story's last page, and allows readers to draw our own conclusions, perhaps based on our experiences in life and in literature. While she ends the piece without a clear resolution, Gaspar de Alba provides the information needed to hypothesize an improved living situation for the young girl, made possible through positive interactions with other girls and women of the village, as well as through the power which comes with knowledge, here signified by the school at the top of the hill. This staunch belief in her character's ability to overcome adversity lends a powerful message to Gaspar de Alba's work and provides readers with the ability to understand the resilience of individuals placed in difficult circumstances.

Utilizing first-person narration to address the issue of sexual abuse, Gaspar de Alba

also guides readers into her subject's life and allows the young girl to trust us enough to reveal the suffering experienced at the hands of her stepfather. Here again, this method of discussion removes all semblances of cold, psychological jargon and provides an opportunity for the writer to present disturbing facts in a gentle way, leading her readers to understand the evils of sexual abuse as we empathize with the actions of the young narrator. As within the works of Cisneros, Gaspar de Alba protects the anonymity of her young subject while also representing the powerlessness experienced by victims of violence, and the narrator freely describes her experiences without fear of judgment or continued suffering.

Unlike the mother within "The Mystery of Survival," Gaspar de Alba never leaves her readers' sides and comforts us with the promise of survival, hinted at in the story's title. Though we become aware of the young girl's torture on the story's first page, the author first assures readers of her subject's escape within the opening line, "When my mother left me in the Colonia La Gran María, I was ten years old and I hated men" (9). Thus, though readers encounter the disturbing details of the girl's abuse, and her reasons for possessing great hatred at an early age, we also are made aware of her eventual transformation, which comes after fleeing the house of her abuser. The writer also utilizes the powerful relationships found among women to demonstrate the strength of survivors, for the young narrator finds sanctuary with her mother's cousin and is assured opportunity through her interaction with the teacher of the local school, undoubtedly a mentor to the town's female residents. Perhaps most dramatically, Gaspar de Alba reclaims the girl's identity for her with the story's end, replacing the narrator's frightened perception of women as "like the earth," an idea first established by the abusive stepfather who sought to take all that he wanted, much like plucking crops from the soil,

with the promise of a better life, symbolized by the town's school atop a hill that smells “of wet earth” (9, 18). With this image, the young girl's survival is assured, and Gaspar de Alba guarantees her character a future, instilling hope within her readers along the way.

Similarly, another successful survival tale emerges within “Facing the Mariachis,” also by Gaspar de Alba. In this selection, one of several tales involving Estrella González, a curandera and seer, the author utilizes a tragic instance of rape as the catalyst for great change, an event that will directly affect the lives of three women while touching countless others. Focusing primarily upon Mercedes, a newly married Chicana fulfilling a prior obligation to Estrella, the author again becomes a counselor, examining basic feminist tenets of self-reliance and personal happiness while reinforcing the importance of survival throughout the piece. Refusing to consider, even for a moment, the possibility of a victim succumbing to her abuse, Gaspar de Alba beautifully captures the resilience of the human spirit and the desperate desire to survive, even in the most difficult circumstances. Through this interpretation, she encourages other victims and interested readers while demonstrating the power that comes with survival. Most importantly, Gaspar de Alba reveals the strength of individuals and the need to find endurance within one's self, reminding readers that no one else is responsible for our happiness in life.

Years before her current marriage, which is depicted as healthy and supportive, Mercedes is repeatedly raped by a mentally disabled man, the assistant to her town's local curandero. When she becomes pregnant, at the age of fourteen, Mercedes is forced, by her mother, to marry her rapist, and soon gives birth to a disabled child. Overwhelmed and frightened, she seeks the guidance of Estrella González, who is, in actuality, the

biological mother of Mercedes. Though Estrella agrees to help the desperate young woman and provides a poison that kills both the child and the rapist, she requires the use of Mercedes's body at a later date, to “plant a child inside her with magic” (105).

Thus it is that Mercedes returns, while on her honeymoon, to Estrella's hut for the ritual which will result in the birth of a daughter, the granddaughter of the curandera, and “a voice in the new generation...[who] will find it more difficult to forget” (102). This child, named Xochitl in honor of the memories of the past, grows up to become a writer, spanning the gap between the past and present while giving a voice to those who were once silenced forever. And it is with Xochitl's birth that her mother's and grandmother's suffering is validated while she emerges as a testament to human strength, the ultimate survivor.

Within “Facing the Mariachis,” Gaspar de Alba again examines the effects of violence upon surviving victims and also addresses the strength of female relationships. As with “The Mystery of Survival,” the author allows the main character, Mercedes, to narrate her own experiences first-hand as she recounts them to her new husband, and Gaspar de Alba fills in the gaps with her writer's perspective. Through this technique, the subject and reader relationship is again made personal, and we become privy to the details of Mercedes's unhappy childhood as her husband first learns of them. Unlike the nameless narrator within “The Mystery of Survival,” Mercedes blatantly describes her experiences of abuse as a young girl and also demonstrates her ability to transcend years of suffering while achieving a normal and productive life. Gaspar de Alba, through Mercedes's characterization, reinforces the possibility of survival and reveals her subject's identity as an adult woman, armed with the ability to survive successfully in a difficult world. There is no need to protect Mercedes from the judgment of others, as the author

does within “The Mystery of Survival,” for the main character within “Facing the Mariachis” has dealt successfully with her early trauma and carries no sense of doubt or responsibility with her, choosing, instead, to continue living as much as possible.

Yet it is Mercedes's interaction with Estrella, the elderly curandera, that most dramatically impacts Gaspar de Alba's story while establishing the importance and necessity of survival. Because the old medicine woman ended Mercedes's suffering years before, the main character is indebted to her and offers her womb as payment, returning to Estrella after marrying a decent man who loves Mercedes very much. Estrella impregnates Mercedes through a supernatural ritual full of symbolic eroticism and utilizes the young woman's womb as a “piñata. The piñata shall carry the memory. When the piñata breaks, the memory will be the destiny of she who comes” (Gaspar de Alba 100). Thus, Estrella's vision for the future, contained within Mercedes's womb, is conceived, and the events of several of Gaspar de Alba's stories are set into motion. Though the tales play out across the pages of her collection, the author allows each to exist entirely on its own as well, adding to the intended meaning of the pieces. For readers, “Facing the Mariachis” reveals the promises Ana Castillo addresses regarding the transcendence of survival and the hopes of an improved future, as Gaspar de Alba places great emphasis upon the birth of this female child, a savior, of sorts, who will speak for all women once silenced forever. With her arrival, the suffering of her ancestors, her grandmother, and mother will be redeemed, and her message of survival will remain long after she is gone.

Here, the author symbolically captures the courage possessed by survivors of abuse and provides hope for readers in similar situations. Gaspar de Alba also explores the

guilt carried by many victims, and demonstrates the need to separate one's self from past incidents. Through her use of the supernatural, demonstrated by Estrella's numerous powers, the author lends a veil of fantasy to the tale, allowing events not normally possible to seem commonplace; thus, the idea of overcoming great trauma appears as a standard expectation alongside less believable occurrences. "Facing the Mariachis" requires a suspension of readers' beliefs while also asking us to consider the possibility of mysticism's presence within the everyday world, as demonstrated through the supernatural abilities of Estrella. Because we struggle to understand the conception of a child through the intercession of a curandera, an unimaginable feat within any story, it is no great stretch to assume Mercedes's survival as a victim of repeated sexual abuse. With this manipulation of events, Gaspar de Alba makes the impossible seem real, and no circumstance is too difficult to achieve or overcome. As she does within "The Mystery of Survival," the writer again refuses to consider death as an alternative to suffering, infusing great power into her characters as they possess strong wills and fearless hearts. Gaspar de Alba's unwavering certainty remains a testament to both her characters and readers, giving us the strength to continue; for indeed, there is no other option.

The theme of survival explored by Gaspar de Alba again appears within Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, a novel composed of vignettes, and the stories of violence emerge slowly, as told through the eyes of Esperanza, the novel's central character. Like Gaspar de Alba's refusal to address any outcome besides a successful one, Cisneros also establishes the desire to overcome the most trying circumstances within her works. Infusing the possibility of survival throughout the course of her narration, Cisneros accurately captures the arduous process of rising above one's situation

in search of something better. In each short selection, which reads like a journal entry from a young girl's diary, the reality of the situation reveals itself through the gaps in the sentences, appearing in what is only hinted at, not stated clearly. Unlike the vivid prose of *Women Hollering Creek*, the brevity of each piece within *The House on Mango Street* illustrates the poetic talent Cisneros possesses, and her ability to explore the truth among a few short lines of text. In this manner, Cisneros assumes her place as a writer reporting the facts of physical and sexual abuse while empathizing with the young victims' conflicted feelings. Carefully dissecting this difficult issue, the author successfully captures her subjects' emotions while furthering the reader's understanding of this debilitating trauma.

In her familiar way, Cisneros again utilizes the narrator's casual voice to welcome readers into a circle of understanding, made possible only through the careful observations of Esperanza. As virtual friends of the young girl, we become privy to her innermost thoughts while gaining knowledge of the violence invading her everyday existence. Because she is a writer in possession of hope for a promising future, Esperanza maintains the clarity needed to view the reality of her situation and those of her friends; thus, she reveals her perceptions in great detail for her readers to interpret the truth. As within the stories of abuse from *Woman Hollering Creek*, Cisneros's narrator speaks directly to readers in the same manner of conversation used with her girlfriends and classmates, thus establishing the feeling of familiarity inherent within many of the author's pieces. Esperanza bears the marks of a budding author herself, and is, perhaps, a younger version of Cisneros; thus, she carries with her an insight typically demonstrated by older individuals. Her ability to capture the meaning of life's difficulties furthers the possibility of Esperanza's success in life, even as those around her fall victim to the

tragedy of current situations.

The issue of child abuse is first explored within "What Sally Said," as Esperanza recounts the false courage of her friend, Sally, as she endures endless beatings at the hand of her father. Maintaining a brave face, for "He never hits me hard," Sally defends her father's actions, "at school she'd say she fell...He thinks I'm going to run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed" (92). Yet the grave reality of Sally's life remains in what goes unsaid by her, though Esperanza is not fooled at all, "because who believes her. A girl that big, a girl who comes in with her pretty face all beaten and black can't be falling off the stairs" (92).

Cisneros implies the silence imposed within the selection's title, then repeats "He never hits me hard" for emphasis, also explaining that "Sally doesn't tell about the time he hit her with his hands like a dog, she said, like if I was an animal" (92). Thus, the willingness to hide her father's abuse conflicts with Sally's desire to confide certain aspects of her experience, censoring the very worst from her narrative. Cisneros's insight into the situation, revealed through the observations of young Esperanza, draws attention to Sally's lack of control as a helpless victim. Though she attempts to escape her abusive home, "[coming] finally with a sack full of clothes and a paper bag of sweetbread her mama sent," Sally returns to her abuser too willingly, swayed by her father's eyes, "little from crying," and his empty promise that "this is the last time" (93).

At this point within the vignette, even Esperanza appears to believe the father and his desperation, urging "we didn't need to worry," though the moment of reprieve is too brief, and soon, "Sally's father catches her talking to a boy and the next day she doesn't come to school. And the next" (93). As the cycle of violence continues, so do Sally's excuses, and she again explains her father's actions, "he just went crazy, he just forgot he

was her father between the buckle and the belt” (93). Nothing is resolved, then, with the story's end, and Sally remains the same throughout the piece, though Esperanza, and, therefore, the reader, recognize the tragedy waiting to occur if the cycle is not stopped.

Through Cisneros's characterization of the main character, which enables Esperanza to comprehend the gravity of Sally's situation, readers also come to terms with the reality of the piece and recognize the cyclical nature of violence in the young girl's life. Though Sally and Esperanza are products of similar circumstances, they possess exceedingly different senses of awareness, much like Patricia's skewed perceptions within “*My Tocaya*.” Choosing to depict such dramatically different characters in two girls from the same setting, Cisneros investigates the extent of possibilities existing for the residents of Mango Street and demonstrates the results of their actions. While Sally remains stagnant, unable to overcome the problems of her domestic life, Esperanza learns from the tragic experiences of her friend and begins a transformation of will that continues throughout the novel.

Sally again appears within “Red Clowns,” though this time, it is Esperanza, the young narrator, who endures the horror of sexual abuse by a stranger at a carnival. Cisneros also employs the power of words, both spoken and unspoken, within this tale, beginning with the harsh remark uttered by Esperanza, “Sally, you lied” (99). Readers already possess knowledge of Sally and Esperanza, as revealed in “What Sally Said”; thus the tragedy of “Red Clowns” is made more profound when Esperanza, who sees everything with careful eyes, reveals the magnitude of her encounter while “waiting by the red clowns...standing by the tilt-a-whirl where you said” (99). Though her frustration and disgust are obvious from the first lines of the piece, Esperanza's reluctance to reveal everything to her friend, “I don't remember. Please don't make me tell it all,” signals a

loss of innocence for the main character (99).

Perhaps most disturbing within "Red Clowns" is Esperanza's knowledge that "It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?" (99). With these remarks, encompassing the brief first paragraph, Cisneros describes Esperanza's abuse and the emotional torment which follows. What begins as a child's trip to a local carnival, suggested in the title, becomes a nightmare for Esperanza almost immediately. Interestingly, and rather ironically, Sally assumes the dominant role in the story, as Esperanza enters the unfamiliar world of male attention and unwanted sexual acts while waiting for "such a long time" for her friend to emerge from the shadows with "that big boy" (99).

The tone of "Red Clowns" differs greatly from the casual account demonstrated within "What Sally Said," and, here, readers assume a voyeuristic role while encountering the anguished thoughts of Esperanza. This piece, narrated by the main character, as are all of the vignettes within the novel, is intended only for Sally, as Esperanza expresses her anger and frustration after an unwanted sexual encounter at the local carnival. With this short selection, Esperanza's vulnerability as a victim is revealed for the first time, and the young, confident narrator of the novel is replaced by a broken-hearted girl desperately in need of comfort and reassurance.

Sally, another victim of violence who relishes the attention of older boys, is lost in her own experiences when Esperanza is "grabbed...by the arm" and assaulted by a stranger who mumbles, "I love you, Spanish girl, I love you,...press[ing] his sour mouth to [hers]" (100). Unable to help her inexperienced friend, Sally later listens silently as Esperanza angrily confronts her, asking "Why did you leave me all alone?" (100). Here,

Cisneros expertly captures the essence of Sally's role as a silent victim, distinguishing her dramatically from Esperanza, who, though damaged, refuses to ignore the gravity of the situation. Undoubtedly, Sally endures similar instances of abuse often, as implied within "What Sally Said;" thus she cannot offer Esperanza any hopeful words. With this contrast between the two characters' reactions to the events at the carnival, Cisneros again emphasizes the diverging path each girl follows, and Sally's inability to surmount her suffering is evident in her response to Esperanza's anger. Yet it is this anger, a normal response to her assault, which assures readers of the main character's resilience. Refusing to suffer silently, Esperanza maintains a vigilant attitude and questions the perceptions of others while examining her own experiences in a realistic way.

It is Esperanza, as the victim of the story, who emerges successfully, armed with new knowledge that "They all lied. All the books and the magazines, everything that told it wrong" (100). With her romanticized idea of sex, once gleaned from the pages of teen magazines and romance novels, now destroyed forever, Esperanza's eyes are opened to the harsh reality of the world in which she lives. Though this marks a tragic death of innocence for the budding young writer, it is also the beginning of a new understanding, which reveals itself in the final pages of Cisneros's novel. Also of importance within Esperanza's frustration is the reality of Cisneros's success as a writer reporting the truth of her character's experience. Though Esperanza is assaulted, a terrible moment for the young girl and the reader to endure, Cisneros does not trivialize the incident, as "books and magazines" often do, but captures the horror of this moment accurately. Cisneros is, quite literally, saving countless other young women from the confusion and disgust Esperanza experiences while attempting to understand the attack. Thus, the writer takes up where others have failed, and reveals the truth of the situation, complete with all of its

painful and gritty details. The author's presentation of Esperanza's abuse clearly depicts the anger and frustration experienced by many victims of violence, and Cisneros does not shield her readers from the circumstances of this event. Because she assures us of the main character's survival, the author can frankly share the horror of Esperanza's trip to the carnival, thus providing a realistic portrayal of an all-too-common occurrence in the lives of many young women. Perhaps as disturbing as Esperanza's victimization is Sally's complete lack of understanding after her friend's encounter, and through this depiction, Cisneros hints at the true tragedy of "Red Clowns."

Sally appears a third and final time as the focus of "Linoleum Roses," which follows her through the beginnings of a teenage marriage that threatens to become disastrous. The narration of this vignette bears similarities to "What Sally Said," allowing Esperanza to reveal her perceptions of her friend's life, based purely upon Sally's own statements. Though Esperanza and Sally possess the same experiences as victims of abuse, only Esperanza maintains the understanding needed to escape a cyclical life of unending violence. Sally, once tortured daily by her father, "got married like we knew she would, young and not ready but married just the same" (101). While this may not raise any warning flags initially, Esperanza continues to explain Sally's new situation, "she married...in another state where it's legal to get married before eighth grade...She says she's in love, but I think she did it to escape" (101). Revealing this insight, Esperanza again demonstrates her ability to overcome the circumstances of her childhood while also learning from the experiences of others, a trait Sally simply lacks. Interestingly, "Linoleum Roses" immediately follows "Red Clowns" in the course of *The House on Mango Street*, and the narrator's confident tone has returned in the episode after the trip to the carnival. Sally again assumes her role as the perpetual victim of abuse,

and, through Esperanza's eyes, readers become aware of the permanence of this situation.

With this admission, Cisneros reveals the finality of Sally's choice, which propels the young girl into a domestic life solely to flee her father's abuse. Sadly, Sally's new husband appears strikingly similar to her father, a common circumstance among victims of repeated abuse. Literally switching one abusive setting for another, Sally admits, "She is happy, except sometimes her husband gets angry and once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay. Except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working" (101-102). Thus, Sally remains a literal prisoner in her husband's house, content, for now, to "[look] at all the things they own...She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake" (102).

These vivid images mock the false promises of Sally's marriage while emphasizing her status as a victim held, again, in captivity. Unable to make the slightest move, for fear of inciting her husband's temper, she has not "escaped" at all, and remains the same frightened girl who once defended her father at school; yet now, she must defend her husband to her friends. Cisneros's use of fleeting ideas, roses which fade and die, and wedding cake which disappears quickly or rots, symbolizes the future of Sally's own marriage and the uncertainty of her role as a survivor. Because Esperanza recognizes the reality of her friend's situation, she alone is not doomed to repeat it. Though Sally is not guaranteed a second chance within the vignette, Cisneros's role as an empathetic counselor successfully impacts the main character, Esperanza, allowing her to escape the fate of so many young women in similar situations. In fact, it is quite easy to imagine the young narrator growing into a woman of Cisneros's caliber.

Truly, Esperanza, as the novel's main character, possesses insight and determination rivaling that of the author. As suggested by her name, translated as "Hope," the young girl's unwavering hope for a better life than the only one she knows provides the motivation necessary to remain steadfast and focused on the future. Like many of the characters within these stories, Esperanza assures her survival through sheer determination and endurance, while sharing her experiences and those of others along her personal journey. In this manner, she and the other subjects resemble Chicana writers as they remain standing after overcoming numerous obstacles placed before them on their paths to equality and justice for all women. Through the subjects of their narrations, these writers successfully achieve their purpose as advocates, counseling characters and readers toward understanding and compassion while addressing the issues of violence which impact the lives of many women across the world.

CHAPTER IV

THE ARTIST AS ACTIVIST: LA LLORONA AS LITERARY DEVICE

While Chicana writers must overcome many obstacles and assume the role of advocates in their quest to eradicate violence against women, they also utilize literary techniques in their attempt to reach as many readers as possible, thus impacting large populations of concerned citizens. Relying heavily upon their own experiences as victims and survivors, these artists easily attend to women in similar situations while illuminating the effects of violence for anyone willing to listen. In this manner, Chicana authors also employ both Spanish and English within the pages of their texts, making their words accessible to many while also including monolingual readers.

Yet it is the use of one particular literary device, the myth of La Llorona, the weeping woman, that is especially noteworthy, as these artists pull images from ancient legends and childhood bedtime stories while embracing an archaic symbol of female oppression. Because the story of La Llorona endures through time, most readers have encountered her tale, at some point within their lives, and she remains a figure of loaded metaphors steeped in the Chicana tradition. It is through her experiences of suffering and ultimate survival that the works of Chicana writers are perhaps best revealed, and the similarities between her tale and those of other survivors cannot be ignored. Thus, she exists as an historical figure and a literary technique used to encourage and educate readers of Chicana literature.

Many Chicana authors utilize the ancient myth within the pages of their works to encourage and sustain readers throughout difficult experiences. This technique also allows the writers to reclaim La Llorona's meaning as a symbol of strength and resilience in the face of great tragedy, thus providing another method for counseling characters, and interested readers, while investigating the issues which threaten their sense of safety. Because La Llorona retains a literary presence as an extremely loaded metaphor, it is necessary to understand the myths which define her place in Chicana literature. As activists seeking to change the currently held perceptions of women across the world, and more specifically as Chicanas striving to improve the situations of their fellow Chicanas, these authors investigate the stories of subjugation which previously defined this historical figure and reclaim her status as a symbol of hope for all victims of oppression. In this manner, La Llorona's legacy transforms dramatically from a frightening tale of murder and hatred into a lasting metaphor filled with inspiration and the possibility of survival.

As Wendy Swyt examines within her explication of "Hungry Women," the presence of La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe in Chicana writing serve to strengthen the characterization of female figures as both traitors and innocent maidens. This dichotomy, long a part of Chicano culture, manifests itself most thoroughly within the La Llorona myth, a tale dating back hundreds of years to the time before Cortés's conquest of Mexico. Assuming a position in Mexican folklore as a type of "bogyman," La Llorona is hated and feared for her supposed desire to kill innocent children, especially those who choose to disobey their parents. La Malinche also maintains a malevolent role within Mexican history; for her relationship with Cortés is largely blamed for the fall of the Aztec empire. Though the two women share many

characteristics, it must be understood that La Llorona is perceived as a mythic figure in Mexican folklore, yet La Malinche truly existed as an actual resident of pre-conquest Mexico. While it is believed by some scholars that La Malinche and La Llorona are actually the same woman, an historical figure who once walked the land that is now Mexico, the distinctly separate myths mark a split in her life's story and the lessons she continues to teach.

Though the separation of the two myths is often confusing and problematic, some scholars maintain that, indeed, La Malinche and La Llorona were the same person, yet it is impossible to accurately prove this fact hundreds of years after her death. The divergence of her stories stems largely from historical accuracy and established superstition, and both tales remain active in Mexican and Chicana literature today. Because the stories are inextricably linked, many authors and critics refer to the figures as one entity, utilizing her legends, as necessary, to address an issue or symbolize a character trait. Like all individuals, La Malinche/La Llorona is multidimensional, possessing a variety of feelings, emotions, and characteristics, and in this way, she appeals to the humanity within all readers. Perhaps due to the enduring quality of La Llorona's legend, she appears most frequently within the works of Chicana authors, as a symbol of great tragedy, and also as a survivor.

According to Irene I. Blea's findings within her book *La Chicana and the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender*, La Llorona is the "first female to appear in Mexican-American oral tradition as well as in written Chicana scholarship" (27). Her story has survived wars and natural disasters while migrating from the rural areas of Mexico to the bustling cities of San Antonio, Chicago, and beyond, adapting as necessary to accommodate the conveniences of modern life. Yet before La Llorona can be judged,

whether as a monstrous figure who preys upon the fears of disobedient children or as a woman desperate to salvage some sense of redemption for herself and her child, the history behind the myth must be carefully examined, for “the tales have taken on legendary and mythical forms, with enduring and frightening symbolism perhaps not yet recognized” (Blea 27).

Blea's research reveals that Malintzin, La Llorona's given name, lived a privileged life as the daughter of a representative to the court of Moctezuma, the Aztec ruler. Well-traveled and highly educated, Malintzin is believed, by some scholars, to be the niece of Moctezuma. After her father's death and her mother's subsequent remarriage, which produced a male heir, Malintzin was traded to another tribe, and perhaps several times thereafter, thus providing her with increased knowledge of the varying cultures of the 1500's in pre-conquest Mexico. With Cortés's arrival, Moctezuma desired peaceful relations and sent offerings to the Spanish camp. Among the gifts of jewelry, tapestries, and quetzal plumes, Moctezuma also presented Cortés with twenty women, including the fourteen-year-old Malintzin (Blea 30-31).

As the property of a Spanish soldier, Malintzin was exposed to the language spoken by Cortés's men and her gift for languages was soon revealed, deeming her worthy of the explorer's companionship alone. Malintzin's knowledge of indigenous languages certainly proved useful to Cortés and his expedition, and she was eventually baptized, along with the entire group of Aztec women, and renamed Doña Marina. According to Blea, “it is speculated that Malintzin was not only a slave but also a woman with nowhere to go. Malintzin might have remained with Cortés because she had no options, doing what was necessary to stay alive” (31).

It is Malintzin's role as Cortés's consort that forever darkens her presence in

Mexico's history, and she is most often referred to as La Malinche, the traitor, “the woman who betrayed Mexico and made possible the Spanish conquest” (Blea 27). Obviously, to place the complete destruction of an entire race of people solely upon the shoulders of one young slave girl seems absurd, and it is interesting to note that, originally, Cortés was given the title *malinche*. Eventually this moniker disappeared and the “male-dominated tradition recorded Doña Marina as the traitor, rationalizing that her services were voluntary and that male charm and intelligence had made it possible for Cortés to conquer Mexico” (Blea 31).

It is largely believed that Malintzin became pregnant by Cortés and gave birth to a son, setting into motion the makings of a centuries-old myth. Blea argues, however, that a child born of an indigenous mother would not be acknowledged by Cortés, for “intercourse with Indians was considered sodomy” and the explorer was already married to a Spanish woman, thus complicating matters further. Here, Blea reminds us, “is a point in the historical account of Malintzin where history leaves us and fantasy emerges” (32). According to the legend, Cortés wished to return to Spain with his son, a separation Malintzin would not allow. Instead, perhaps fearing both a lifetime of despair and her son's death in a faraway land, which Indians believed led to eternal damnation, “Malintzin committed the ultimate sacrifice and drowned her child, thereby keeping his spirit in his own land and laying it to rest” (Blea 32). Whether the murder of Malintzin's son, at her own hand, truly occurred remains forever open to speculation, and the tale only serves to reinforce her hated position within the history of Mexico. As the story continues, Malintzin drowned the child in a river and his soul floated away, rather than returning to heaven. Thus, at her death, Malintzin was prohibited from entering paradise until she is reunited with the soul of her son, and she forever wanders the banks of rivers

and streams while crying for her lost child.

With this tragic end, Malintzin becomes La Llorona, “a woman not to be trusted, a woman deviant enough to kill, steal, and try to cheat her way into heaven” (Blea 33). If she cannot have her son, the tale recounts, any child will do, and La Llorona especially prefers disobedient children who frequent rivers, ditches, cemeteries, and vacant lots. She is well-traveled and appears in metropolitan areas as often as rural locations, answering the telephone in San Antonio and interrupting teenagers' phone calls in Austin, thus changing to fit the customs of each region visited. La Llorona also reveals herself quite often to inebriated, abusive men and assumes the characteristics of various animals including donkeys, goats, and horses. She is both beautiful and young, “decrepit [and] old,” dressed in a flowing gown of white silk or black rags (Blea 33).

Nevertheless, in all of her manifestations, La Llorona is a woman to be hated and feared, for she represents all that is unacceptable in female behavior. As Blea notes, “this version of the story tends to depict La Llorona—and thereby all women—as evil, cruel, cheating, and, in general, immoral and unethical. Men also appear to be dishonest, disloyal, and sexually promiscuous; but implied in how the story is told is that all is the woman's fault” (35). And while it is impossible for any rational feminist to forget Cortés's role in the tale, he fades into the background of the listener's imagination when one is bombarded with images of a soul-seeking madwoman lurking just outside the bedroom window.

What must be remembered, if only for its historical accuracy in Mexico's history, is Malintzin's great bravery in the face of enormous strife. She, and therefore La Llorona, “reclaims Aztlan but also keeps alive the spirit of eternal struggle among the last Aztecs until history is set right” (Blea 36). Also of importance is the ironic fact “that Chicanas

are descendants of the conqueror as well as the conquered. They remain conquered in their homeland, and their status, power, and prestige have changed as the politics of men have changed at the national and international level” (Blea 35-36). Thus, if equality is desired by Chicanas and all women, the very basis of our cultures, our myths and histories, must be re-examined and adapted in order to tell the truth.

Ana Castillo adds a more spiritual examination to Irene I. Blea's historical account of La Llorona within *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. Likening La Malinche and La Llorona to the biblical figure of Eve, Castillo traces the religious ramifications of the tale as they affect Chicana women today. Echoing Blea's defense of La Llorona, Castillo also relates, “The insinuation here also is that female sexuality is at fault again, since it is woman who conceives and who therefore gave birth to the new race” (109). Castillo also finds fault with the Catholic church for perpetuating the dichotomy of roles that exist for women, though all humans are sinners in the eyes of God. “In modern man's schema woman must choose between one of two polarized roles, that of mother as portrayed by the Virgin Mary vs. that of whore/traitor as Eve,” she argues, and man's true nature is forgotten or ignored, much like the treachery of Hernán Cortés, for “try as she might, even modern woman never completely escapes a combination of these archetypes” (116-117).

Tey Diana Rebolledo continues the exploration of the La Malinche/La Llorona myth within her book *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature*, though her interpretation of the tale differs significantly from both Blea and Castillo. Approaching Malintzin's role from an historical angle, Rebolledo draws distinct lines of separation between the two figures, and asserts that they “are never confused nor united; their identities remain clear and defined” (63). This statement is disproved clearly

by Blea, and Rebolledo also contradicts herself within the same article, acknowledging that “in folklore, the images and mythology about La Llorona and La Malinche merge until in many areas they are transformed into a unitary figure” (63). Rebolledo also believes that Malintzin's son was truly sent to Spain for schooling while she was married off to a Spanish soldier, Don Juan de Jaramillo, only to die young and “in relative obscurity” (62). Here, Rebolledo's depiction of La Malinche ends, while Blea argues that the son's drowning, by his own desperate mother, marked Malintzin's transformation into La Llorona, the weeping woman.

While it is, perhaps, impossible to accurately determine the true identity of La Llorona, her influence within Chicana literature cannot be denied, and on that point, Blea and Rebolledo agree easily. Though Rebolledo views the myths as distinctly separate, she supports Blea's heroic depiction of both figures, and celebrates their importance and symbolism within the works of Chicana authors. Singing the praises of La Malinche, Rebolledo remarks, “Because she possessed the power of language and political knowledge, for [Chicana writers] La Malinche is a woman who deliberately chose to be a survivor—a woman who lives on in every Chicana today” (64-65).

Rebolledo also examines La Malinche's role within the Chicano Renaissance, specifically focusing upon the very movement that fought to end discrimination. Describing the frustration of the Chicanas eager to “participate equally, with the men in the Chicano movement,” yet constantly removed from the front lines, the author explains, “The women who were concerned with women's issues or who voiced dissent were considered traitors, nonsupportive of La Raza—Malinchistas” (71). Thus, the need for a revision of these myths is clearly evident, for “to use the symbol of La Malinche to malign contemporary women who are fighting for their own values and identity is

especially vindictive” (71). And, certainly, to rely upon the very tale that once oppressed and ruined the lives of an entire culture, a story that is only now coming to light, reveals precisely how much progress remains to be made.

Further manifestations of La Llorona are revealed within Ana María Carbonell's article, “From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue in Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros.” While the author finds similarities between the mythic figure and Coatlicue, the “pre-conquest fertility goddess,” she also provides several possible explanations for the crime committed by La Llorona, all of which offer further insight into the realities of life for indigenous women (Carbonell 53). Describing La Llorona “as *both* a figure of maternal betrayal *and* maternal resistance,” Carbonell presents the weeping woman as a “resistant, culturally specific maternal figure” (54). According to the article, La Llorona embodies “a combination of both extremes” and assumes traits associated with La Malinche *and* La Virgen de Guadalupe, thus becoming fully formed and reminiscent of a real woman (56).

Carbonell also examines a particularly significant version of La Llorona's crime, explaining that, upon their arrival in Mexico, the Spanish soldiers became intrigued by the beauty of the indigenous children and abducted them as presents for their wives. To prevent these tragic, and final, separations, some Indian mothers killed their children, and La Llorona is believed to have resorted to this desperate act. Forever grieving as she searches for her child's soul, which she recognizes among all children, La Llorona mistakenly takes the offspring of others while hoping for a heavenly reunion (Carbonell 56-57). This less frightening, though still tragic story brings a sense of compassion to the entire tale, and while it does not lessen the horror of La Llorona's actions, it does serve to explain them from an historical perspective, “showing that her response cannot be

interpreted in isolation from the hierarchical social system that surrounds her” (Carbonell 57).

Carbonell suggests that La Llorona's actions define the rift existing between the role of the female self in specific relation to the maternal self, a line that divides interdependency from dependence and independence in relationships. While “the female self's community consists of other independent adults, the 'community' to which the maternal self belongs is comprised of dependent children”; thus, La Llorona utilizes her position as a mother to protect her helpless children, even if death is the only solution (Carbonell 57). As a victim of conquest herself, La Llorona regains some semblance of control and assumes a powerful persona, becoming quite God-like, in an effort to rescue future indigenous people by sacrificing her own children. This depiction of La Llorona as a woman filled with desperation, fueled largely by violence and oppression, appears consistently within the fiction of Chicana authors, and Blea and Rebolledo's desire for a reinterpretation of the ancient myth is finally becoming reality.

Sandra Cisneros, one of the most acclaimed Chicana writers, tackles the complexities of La Llorona's myth within the title story of her collection, *Woman Hollering Creek*. Told from the perspective of Cleófilas, a young Mexican woman now living “en el otro lado—on the other side,” this selection documents her brave decision to return to her father's home after enduring a short, but physically and emotionally abusive marriage (Cisneros 44). Cisneros sets the tale along Woman Hollering Creek, an actual stream in Seguin, Texas that “one cross[es] on the way to San Antonio, and then once again on the way back” (46). While yearning for a life of romance and passion similar to that found in the telenovelas and romance novels she loves, Cleófilas comes face to face with the terrifying reality of domestic violence and eventually answers her own question,

“whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain” (46).

Throughout the piece, Cisneros peppers her prose with images of La Llorona and the suffering endured by all women. There are “the pecan trees rustling like ladies in stiff petticoats,” “The neighbor ladies, Soledad, Dolores,...too busy remembering the men who had left through either choice or circumstance and would never come back,” “red red cockscombs, fringed and bleeding a thick menstrual color; and, especially, roses whose sad scent reminded Cleófilas of the dead” (46-47). Surrounded, literally, by Solitude and Pains, in the form of her two neighbor ladies, Cleófilas turns to the river, her third neighbor, for solace and comfort as the violence increases, listening intently to “La Llorona calling her...,wonder[ing] if something as quiet as this drives a woman to the darkness under the trees” (51). Like La Llorona, Cleófilas finally assumes control of her situation, “with one baby on her hip and one in the oven,” and chooses, not death, but life, returning to her family home in Mexico (50).

As Carbonell explains, Cleófilas's interest in the creek, and specifically its cryptic name, propels the main character into action, “suggesting that the indigenous origins of the figure can provide important strategies of resistance for contemporary Chicana and Mexican women” (67). Finally fed up with her own experiences, endured at the hands of her husband, and with the stories from the newspapers of women “found,...pushed, ...unconscious,...beaten blue,...[by] her ex-husband, her uncle, her friend, her co-worker,” Cleófilas begins to cry, like La Llorona, though quite literally, and confides in the clinic technician performing a sonogram on her unborn child (Cisneros 53). Through this courageous act, revealed in a moment of complete vulnerability and with “her husband in the next room,” Cleófilas is aided by two strong female figures, Felice and Graciela, translated as Happiness and Grace, the opposites of the old neighbor women, and plans

her escape from Seguin, and from the husband capable of destroying her (54).

It is at this point within the vignette that Cisneros changes narrators briefly, giving Felice and Graciela, as Cleófilas's possible role models, a chance to reveal their strength and courage by helping another woman in need. The author's use of irony, quite humorous at times, reveals the truth of her main character's life, "a regular soap opera sometimes," as the other female subjects perceive it to be (55). Cleófilas did indeed dream of a life filled with passion, as only television can capture it, yet she got much more than she ever wanted when she married Juan Pedro.

Cisneros closes the story successfully, tying the images of La Llorona together in the final scene as Felice drives Cleófilas and the young boy "across the arroyo" in her own "pickup," a fact that impresses her passenger immensely (55). As they pass the creek, Felice lets out a "holler" in honor of the stream named after the woman, commenting that "nothing around here is named after a woman...Unless she's the Virgin. I guess you're only famous if you're a virgin" (55). Though initially frightened by the scream, Cleófilas is soon reduced to laughter, "gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water," as she leaves her life of "pain and rage," and with it, the sadness of La Llorona's legacy, behind (56). With these final lines, Cleófilas's transformation, from a weeping woman who hollers and, finally, laughs, is complete, and "Cisneros defines water, which traditionally encircles the La Llorona figure, as a source of positive change, overturning standard interpretations of the myth that connect water with death and destruction" (Carbonell 70). Refusing to endure a life of violence, Cleófilas chooses to return to her father's home with her children in tow, and, in doing so, assures the survival of three lives. Her situation is far removed from the old dreams of the telenovelas, yet she is finally in control of her destiny, and Cisneros succeeds in

presenting Cleófilas as a role model for her readers.

Similarly, the author's use of La Llorona as a secondary character removes the terrifying aspects of the myth from the story completely, as the weeping woman, who also hollers, provides Cleófilas with the strength needed to end her life of suffering in exchange for something better. Though the hollering woman is left behind in Seguin, Cleófilas is forever changed by her brief visits to the river, proving the power within the myth seemingly forgotten by local residents. As Felice notes, La Llorona is not a virgin, though her fame, and thus her story, remain forever within the hearts of these women. Both Cleófilas and the weeping woman continue to endure, as both have suffered great "pain [and] rage," and survived to tell about it (56).

Thus, Cisneros reclaims the ancient tale and allows its powerful message to inspire readers while also empowering the main character, giving Cleófilas the strength and determination necessary to leave a life of suffering behind. Though the author assumes readers' familiarity with the legend of La Llorona, she does not alienate those without knowledge of the myth, for many of Cisneros's characters also lack understanding of the tale. What is clearly achieved, however, is the survival of the main character and her children, and with this, the existence of hope in the face of great strife and uncertainty.

Like Cisneros, Helena María Viramontes also utilizes the La Llorona legend within her fiction, calling upon the figure in the face of violence similar to the experiences of Cleófilas. Within "The Broken Web," a selection from *The Moths and Other Stories*, Viramontes never mentions La Llorona by name, but her presence, symbolized as "a cricket wailing nightly for redemption," is unmistakable (60). Using the image of a nocturnal insect crying through the night, as La Llorona weeps each evening for her lost child, Viramontes links her main character's suffering with that

experienced by the tragic figure in Mexican folklore. With this selection, the author recounts the nightmares of Martha, a young woman unable to escape from her memories of the night her abusive father was murdered by his wife, Martha's mother. Like Cisneros, Viramontes switches perspectives several times, and each female narrator brings her own interpretation to the story. In "The Broken Web," readers hear from Martha and her mother, who remains nameless except for her dual identities as "Mama" and "Tómas's wife," yet we also gain a glimpse of Tómas himself, as seen through the eyes of Olivia, his sometime mistress, and through Martha's aging aunt, the older sister of her mother. As these women speak, Tómas's true nature is revealed repeatedly, and his abusive and womanizing habits are illuminated by four separate female voices.

It is Tómas's constant tormenting that finally leads his wife to commit murder, for she finds herself trapped within a desperate marriage of convenience, wed to the only man who would take her as a bride pregnant by someone else. This family secret becomes a constant source of suffering for Tómas's wife, giving Tómas license to pursue other women while calling his own spouse "a whore, a bitch" (59). Martha, as the child whose conception marked the beginning of this tragic union, suffers most from her father's abuse of her mother, and cannot transcend her parents' actions, even after much time passes. Nightly recalling the events of the murder in her tortured dreams, she turns to the church for guidance, but eventually finds comfort in the presence of her elderly aunt, who reveals the truth regarding her mother's marriage.

Martha's mother, no longer "Tómas's wife," bravely accepts her fate as a criminal, and her motivations are clearly revealed through a one-sided conversation with Tómas. Speaking to him in the moments after she shoots him, Martha's mother "feel[s] so close to [him]; equally dead, but equally real...she could not leave him because she no longer

owned herself. He owned her, her children owned her, and she needed them all to live. And she was tired of living” (60). Finally freeing herself, and, more importantly, her children, from their daily lives of violence, Martha's mother believes that “Her children in time would forgive her...She would become a cricket wailing nightly for redemption. That suited her; she would be wailing for redemption” (60).

Triumphant, yet resigned, Martha's mother assumes a La Llorona role, salvaging her family's survival with one final act of violence. Like her mother, Martha accepts the truth of the situation and, with her aunt, says a rosary for the “souls of the condemned people,...wait[ing],...conduct[ing] the mass of the dead only at night” (62). Martha, however, is not condemned like her parents before her, and, with the final lines of the story, Viramontes assures the readers of her character's survival, a victory that comes only with the painful knowledge of her family's secret. Though Martha's mother falls victim to a legacy of abuse, choosing an actual prison cell over the prison that was once her home, she frees Martha and her siblings forever, allowing them to live without the fear and violence of their childhood.

With this ending, Viramontes, like Cisneros, arms her battered character with the strength needed to break the web of violence and deceit, as the title implies; yet Martha's mother achieves her symbolic freedom through more violence, ending the life of her abuser in an effort to save her children. In this characterization, Viramontes's subject bears perhaps more resemblance to La Llorona than Cisneros's Cleófilas, for Tomás's wife and Martha's mother must deal with the serious effects of her actions for the rest of her life. Thus, this story threatens to end tragically, if realistically, yet Viramontes assures her readers of future survival, if not for the mother, then for Martha, her daughter. As the oldest sibling and witness to her father's death, Martha struggles relentlessly with

the turbulence of her domestic situation, but will, in time, move beyond the experiences of her past. Much like Esperanza within Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Martha observes the suffering of others and understands its ramifications intently; therefore, she is not doomed to repeat the actions of others.

Here, Viramontes captures the cyclical nature of violence's grasp upon its victims, an issue within many stories, but she also successfully leads her subject and readers toward the promise of a future free from pain, as Martha ultimately escapes her family's cycle of tragedy, freed, ironically, by the murder of her father at the hands of her mother. Though she is changed forever by this fateful event, an experience through which Viramontes carefully leads her readers, Martha emerges intact, possessing the knowledge needed to survive on her own in the world.

Viramontes continues the La Llorona theme within another story from the same collection, focusing again upon a mother's love for her child within "The Cariboo Cafe." Set in an immigrant neighborhood of Los Angeles, the selection includes several characters, each given a narrative opportunity as seen within "The Broken Web," that Carbonell describes

as La Llorona figures whose central concern in the tales of maternal resistance is to maintain or re-establish family unity so she can protect and care for her children. All of these characters either lose or are threatened with the loss of a child or dependent, and actively attempt, with varying degrees of success, to recuperate or prevent that loss. (59)

The story revolves predominantly around Macky and his sister, Sonya, though the owner of the cafe and "that crazy lady" also figure heavily into the basic plot of Viramontes's tale (69). After Sonya, who is "maybe five, maybe six," loses her

apartment key and attempts to make her way to an acquaintance's house for an after-school snack, she and her brother are abducted by "that crazy lady," an unnamed woman from South America still mourning the disappearance of her young son years before. Burdened by her grief and the unfamiliarity of this chaotic new city, the woman mistakes Macky for her lost son, Geraldo, who is "nowhere to be found" (73). After caring for Sonya and Macky overnight, the woman proceeds to the Cariboo Cafe for a meal, where the owner recognizes the missing children and calls the police. As the story unfolds, both the woman and the owner reveal similar tragic experiences of losing their sons, she to the political regime occupying her native country, and he in much the same way, though in the jungles of Vietnam.

Viramontes's use of a male character to signify La Llorona is extremely original, though with the story's end, it is the cafe owner who turns the woman in, failing to recognize the similarities existing between her story and his own. He is unable to see past the racism that pervades his mind, and too willingly calls the authorities almost daily, refusing to hide illegal immigrants in the cafe's restroom and incapable of showing compassion for a traumatized woman, insisting only that "Children gotta be with their parents, family gotta be together. It's only right" (77). And, ironically, the cafe owner is right, for his son should still be alive, just as Geraldo should still be with his mother, yet he knows too much about life to hope for happy endings.

The association of the woman with La Llorona is overt, and she describes herself as "frantic, desperate," as she recalls "the night of La Llorona [and] the women [who] come up from the depths of sorrow to search for their children...I hear the wailing of the women and know it to be my own" (72-73). Upon finding Macky and his sister, the woman is transformed and her hope is restored, if only for a short time. Viramontes

further extends the La Llorona metaphor by making the woman a “washerwoman,... washing other people's laundry, rinsing off other people's dirt until [my] hands crust and chap” (74). Carbonell argues, however, that this treatment of water by Viramontes “arises from the external maternal conditions of [the woman's] life...associat[ing] this harmful water with the dehumanizing economic conditions of the washer woman's *outer* social world against which she struggles” (61).

Thus, the water of the woman's occupation differs greatly from the “liquid darkness” of the story's end, a form of water that leads to the death of the woman after she refuses to relinquish Macky to the police pointing guns at her. Though her demise is imminent, the woman finally finds her voice in the face of great danger, and releases years of pent up anger and desperation in a single instance, “laughing, howling at their stupidity because they should know by now that I will never let my son go” (79). As she dies, the washerwoman finally transcends her situation, and is comforted with the knowledge that “we are going home. My son and I,” a reunion made possible only through her death (79). “This water,” Carbonell believes, “cleanses her own spiritual well-being; it allows her to discard the mutilation and destruction she experiences in the material world for union with her son and wholeness in the spiritual world” (64). Like La Llorona, the woman finds peace among the souls in heaven, and her suffering on earth is finally over, at last.

As within La Llorona's myth, the woman from “The Cariboo Cafe” finds comfort only through death, a transformational experience which finally links her soul with her lost son. The tragic ending of the story, a common characteristic among Viramontes's collection, offers no resolution other than the finality of death. Though the missing children will reunite with their parents, an event the woman never experienced in her

quest to find her young child, the owner of the cafe remains unchanged by the circumstances of the “crazy woman's” killing, and he continues his existence in the same manner as before, tormenting undocumented workers while silently suffering from the untimely death of his own son years before.

Despite the sense of hopelessness implied by the story's ending, Viramontes also redeems the woman's position in the final moments of her life. Convinced that she has discovered her son again, the woman only wishes to provide a safe and loving home for young Macky and his sister, and her intentions are completely honorable. Finally standing up to the oppressive regime that abducted her son, here represented by the police officers called to pick up the missing children, the woman speaks for all individuals tormented by the inequities of government power, and screams her thoughts out loud, for everyone to hear. Her death at the hands of the policeman symbolizes the experiences of all who enter the Cariboo Cafe, from the workers at the garment factory and the drug dealers of the neighborhood to the owner himself, who fails to recognize the similarities existing between his sadness and that of the patrons he intently despises. Like La Llorona, the “crazy woman” assumes the burden of suffering for everyone associated with the cafe, and her death captures the absolute powerlessness dominating the lives of every character within the story. Thus, through her final actions, much like those of Martha's mother within “The Broken Web,” the woman achieves a sense of control, if only for a brief moment.

Wendy Swyt continues to explore the power of Viramontes's characters as La Llorona figures within her article, “*Hungry Women: Borderlands Mythos in Two Stories* by Helena Maria Viramontes.” Focusing specifically upon both “The Broken Web” and “The Cariboo Cafe,” Swyt examines the cultural emphasis of “The Hungry Woman,” an

Aztec creation myth that intersects with the allegorical figures of La Llorona, La Malinche, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, “women who will not be satisfied or contained” (190). Citing both Viramontes stories as examples, Swyt analyzes the author’s literary technique, as “the narrative design illustrates the experience of cultural hybridity as it exposes and critiques structures of domination in Chicano/a border culture” (190).

Both pieces involve a character’s horrific death, and, according to Swyt, “it is within this narrative web that the mythos of the hungry woman emerges,” as an image that reappears consistently throughout the course of Viramontes’s tales. Through her interpretation of this archetype, Swyt suggests, Viramontes successfully reveals the reality of life for her Borderland characters. Sparing no detail from the reader, Viramontes does not mask the grittiness of poverty, and, like other Chicana writers including Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo, she depicts the solitude of “otherness,” characterizing her female subjects “as women who deviate from their appropriate roles as mother, wife, mistress, or patriot, but in the multiple sense of betrayer/betrayed they critique and exceed the determination that set them up as seductive scapegoats” (192). These “other” women, then, as characterized by Viramontes, serve to strengthen the presence of Chicanas as literary figures while also addressing the difficulties encountered as members of an oppressed culture.

Unlike Cisneros and Viramontes, Alicia Gaspar de Alba relies upon a strictly positive interpretation of La Llorona’s myth within “The Last Rite,” a selection from *The Mystery of Survival and Other Stories*. Though most of her tales hint at La Llorona’s presence in passing references, usually in a mother’s scolding remark to her disobedient daughter, this story, one of a series that depicts the life of Estrella González, a wise curandera, only refers to the weeping woman as a source of strength and guidance.

Gaspar de Alba humorously plays with the constructs of the ancient tale, even giving Estrella's elderly mule the name Malinche. "The Last Rite" follows Estrella as she prepares for the imminent birth of her granddaughter, an event foretold in an earlier vision that will bring the purpose of Estrella's life full circle.

Though this mention of La Llorona is brief, Gaspar de Alba assumes her readers' familiarity with the legend and makes no mention of the sadness involved, thus emphasizing the hope that also emerges when the story is analyzed. Throughout her preparations, Estrella sings verses from *The Ballad of La Llorona*, a song that "gave her the most comfort on these long nights of waiting for it reminded her of Malintzin, mother of La Raza, and of Tonantzin and Coatlicue, mothers of the Earth and of the Night—the immortal memories in her blood" (91). Thus, La Llorona and her many manifestations provide inspiration and strength to the medicine woman, allowing her to accomplish her life's purpose by restoring memories of pre-conquest Mexico to the modern world, through the birth of her granddaughter.

As Estrella hopes for a successful ritual, she "[takes] her flute out and play[s] another tune of *The Ballad of La Llorona*," finding comfort in the ancient tale of another powerful woman (97). This ending to the story re-emphasizes Gaspar de Alba's complete transformation of the myth, and her use of the positive elements signals a marked shift in the purpose of this enduring symbol in Chicana literature. Gaspar de Alba's reinterpretation of the myth is especially meaningful, for all negative references to the weeping woman are absent, and the author only utilizes the power of La Llorona's story to comfort and sustain her main character. Though she assumes readers' knowledge of the ancient legend, like Cisneros and Viramontes, Gaspar de Alba only mentions the positive attributes possessed by La Llorona; thus, her characterization does not frighten

readers new to the myth's presence in literature. The writer's use of La Llorona's tale strengthens the woman's significance in Chicana writing, as the courage found within her story serves to inspire readers continuously.

Gloria Anzaldúa completely turns the myth on its head in her children's book, *Prietita y La Llorona/ Prietita and the Ghost Woman*. By embracing this tale once used to frighten and restrain children, Anzaldúa reclaims it for all readers and provides a beautiful and powerful image perfect for use as a bedtime story. Set in South Texas near the King Ranch, the same area of Texas where Anzaldúa was born, the story revolves around young Prietita who studies with Doña Lola, the local curandera. When Prietita's mother becomes ill with “the old sickness,” the daughter sneaks into the ranch in search of a necessary plant remedy, knowing quite well that “they shoot trespassers” (2, 7). Once inside the ranch property, Prietita becomes lost and frightened as she recalls “her grandmother's stories of La Llorona—the ghostly woman dressed in white,” yet her bravery takes over as she searches desperately for the plant needed to heal her mother (10).

Throughout the search, Prietita is led closer and closer to La Llorona by a series of helpful animals, and when she finally encounters the weeping woman and asks for assistance, the beautifully drawn figure leads the young girl directly to the plant and safely to the ranch's edge. Reunited with her worried family, Prietita recounts her experience with the woman and is encouraged by Doña Lola, who recognizes that La Llorona “is not what others think she is” (29). Like the transformation of the ghost woman, assisted here by Anzaldúa's unique depiction, Prietita is also transformed from a young girl into a woman through her experience, for she has “grown up this night” (30).

Thus, Anzaldúa successfully captures the beauty of the myth for all readers, and

utilizes her talent as a Chicana writer along the way. The book itself contains both Spanish and English text on each page, with specific Spanish words italicized for emphasis and is, therefore, accessible to readers of both languages. Similarly, the illustrations drawn by Maya Christina Gonzalez serve to strengthen the beauty of the story, and La Llorona is depicted as a young woman with flowing hair illuminated by a golden light surrounding her entire body, appearing more angelic than demonic.

On the story's final page, Anzaldúa recounts her own childhood fears of the weeping woman, yet also admits, "even at that age I wondered if there was another side to her" (31). Eventually, she discovered "a powerful, positive side, a side that represents the Indian part and the female part of us. I discovered like Prietita, that things are not always what they seem to be" (31). And truly, with a simplified version of the myth, made accessible to the youngest of children, Anzaldúa captures the very basis of La Llorona's purpose in literature, as the character is not what she seems at all, but much more, remaining a lasting symbol of the strength and power found within all women, screaming to be released.

Like Anzaldúa, Chicana writers continue to employ this ancient tale, embracing and restructuring it to accommodate the changing needs of modern society. Yet La Llorona endures as an example of bravery and self-sacrifice in the face of great strife, shedding her former skin while becoming a survivor. And it is in this role, as a woman altered by years of suffering yet continuing to search for her rightful place in the world, that La Llorona transforms into a symbol utilized by Chicana authors as they seek to address the issues of violence and oppression impacting women today. By investigating the origins of the ancient myth and reinterpreting it for their readers, these writers are changing long-held perceptions of Chicanas in society while leading readers toward a better

understanding of the problems experienced by women of all cultures. Like the screams of La Llorona, which cannot be ignored or forgotten by those that hear them, the words of Chicana writers resonate within the minds of their readers long after the stories end.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

As members of a culture still seeking acceptance from both the United States and Mexico, Chicana writers bear the burdens of societal expectations and the added implications of their positions as artists seeking literary respect and recognition. Because they must surmount numerous obstacles in their journeys as writers, these women possess the strength and determination needed to address specific issues facing Chicano readers and larger audiences today. Focusing primarily upon the crisis of violence against women, a worldwide problem affecting all cultures and income levels, writers including Sandra Cisneros, Helena María Viramontes, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Gloria Anzaldúa seek to educate their readers while also providing the compassion needed to guide concerned individuals toward a deeper understanding of this senseless act.

Utilizing techniques including detailed descriptions of abuse, universal appeal of their stories, and the intermixing of Spanish and English, Chicana writers attempt to reach the largest audience possible, including all who desire more knowledge of these important issues. Though Chicana authors write specifically for Chicana readers, they provide tools of understanding that assure accessibility to readers of all cultures. Once these authors gain their readers' trust, they carefully counsel both subjects and readers toward a deeper understanding of violence's hold upon women in society while establishing the possibility of survival through transcendence of traumatic events.

Existing as examples of survivors who believe in the promise of the future, Chicana authors instill a sense of hope and determination within their characters, thus providing readers with the knowledge needed to overcome our own difficulties.

Through the reclamation of La Llorona's ancient myth, once used to restrain and persecute women, Chicana writers are inventing new identities for modern women while embracing the traits once deemed inappropriate for women to possess. Refusing to remain silent in the face of constant suffering throughout the world, these writers assume the burdens of voiceless victims and draw attention to the issues facing women in every country. In this manner, they essentially restore the voices of once silenced victims while attempting to end further instances of violence.

Chicana writers will continue to address the problems plaguing modern society and assume the role of advocates for both subjects and readers, defending those incapable of escaping their circumstances while infusing others with the ability to transcend their traumatic experiences. As long as victims of oppression require help, Chicana authors will strive endlessly to assist them. Presently, the unsolved murders of over four hundred young girls and women in Juárez, Mexico, just across the border from El Paso, Texas, are gaining international attention from human rights' organizations and women's groups. Because these victims are the United States' closest neighbors, and because some are also employed by American factories at meager wages, this country bears a responsibility to help prevent further killings. Sadly, little media coverage is given to this crisis, and the proliferation of such violence has provoked responses from a variety of artists and writers seeking to reveal the reality of life for women in Juárez.

Thus, it is no surprise to find Chicana writers at the center of this movement as they attempt to illuminate this urgent issue while addressing its effects upon the citizens of

Mexico. Author and journalist Cecilia Ballí literally risked her life to uncover the tragic details of these murders, and her award-winning article, “Ciudad de la Muerte,” or “City of the Dead,” chronicles the social, economic, and political circumstances preventing a thorough investigation from taking place. She is currently researching a book on the Juárez murders. Rosa Linda Fregoso's *meXica Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* explores the issues affecting residents along both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States, and her first chapter, “Toward a Planetary Civil Society,” specifically addresses the Juárez killings and the movement to stop them forever. Alicia Gaspar de Alba also focuses upon the crisis in Juárez within her new novel, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, transforming today's headlines into fiction while illuminating the problems affecting the government's investigation of these events.

And so the work of Chicana writers continues as long as there is suffering and persecution in this society, for these writers seek to eradicate the issues of violence still plaguing our world while also giving readers the knowledge needed to join the quest for tolerance and understanding. Through the efforts of Chicana authors, the lives of many are enriched and the promise of survival exists as a realistic possibility for subjects and readers alike.

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