VISIONS OF THE FEMALE SUBJECT IN THE BORDERLANDS

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Abstract: Drawing on distinctions among concepts regarding the female experience, as well as on postcolonial theory, the proposed paper aims at identifying a series of specific features of the Chicano/a vision of the female subject. It also focuses on apparently irreconcilable differences between Chicano and Chicana literary strategies in dealing with feminine imagery, as well as on a taxonomy of female instances that could be configured in both literary and social spaces.

Key words: female subject, Chicano/a literature, feminism, *mestizaje*, indigenous imagery

Introduction

‘Textbook’ feminism (if we consider it a synonym for white feminism) treats the concept of ‘woman’ not as a matter of individual gender consciousness but as a political category. ‘Femaleness’ is a cultural construction created to counter oppressive male images of women; this concept functions as the basis for the social, economic and political betterment of women. Some feminists attack the psychoanalytic preference for a fragmented female subject, which is seen as free to reconstitute itself in new and liberated forms.

As a result the female subject is treated distinctively and the literary forms in which it develops are consequently strikingly different as well: ethnic feminism prefers a type of writing that represents the self as fractured and fragmented, as against the realist texts with a clear sociological context preferred by non-ethnically bound feminism.

It thus becomes imperative for the Chicana to construct a feminist voice for women of colour with which to speak to white women as well as to men. Gloria

Anzaldúa explains the manner in which Chicanas are oppressed by the cultural imperative that women remain silent, unquestioning and invisible within traditional Chicano culture; even the language that is available to these women expresses masculine rather than feminine consciousness: ‘Chicanas use *nostros* whether we’re male or female. We are robbed of female being by the masculine plural’ (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 54).

Hence, besides being an oppressed subject in the male-female opposition of the community, the Chicana also face the issue of speaking from a discredited cultural position, in a literary environment that has been established and devised to express the lives and thoughts of men (be they coloured or white) and white (only) women. Therefore, the construction of the female subject of the borderlands follows a number of strategies to respond these issues, among which the attempt to re-design inherited stereotypes, the construction of an alternative literary tradition and the challenging of conventional distinctions among literary forms of expression could be mentioned. Furthermore, by an enactment of what has been called ‘border feminism’, Chicanas also advance the issue of performativity, in that the taxonomy of female subject positions is configured through both their theoretical and their literary practice.

In her *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* (2000), Deborah Madsen argues that Chicana feminists are somewhere inbetween the socialist and the psychoanalytic trends – that is they focus on the social consequences of being an oppressed subject, while constantly seeking to produce a third space of imagination through their fiction writing.

Anzaldúa’s definition of the female subject as *nepatlera* or as a *mestiza* (“carrying all five races”) is taken further by Ana Castillo in her *Massacre of the Dreamers*, by introducing the term *Xicanista* to stand for the politically aware female subject in search of a voice, all the while preserving a somewhat individualistic perspective and foregrounding concern for the self. The introduction of all these apparently striking terms functions as a re-configuring of the female subject in the borderlands, previously and traditionally associated with stereotypes of feminine psychoanalysis. The Chicana theoretical framework stands on the ground of revolt against the stereotypical construction of the female as the “other”, with its subsequent modifiers – “the castrated”, “the coloured”, “the banished-from-heaven”, “the submissive”, basically, “the inferior”. Furthermore, some Chicanas (Emma Perez in *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 1999) even

distance themselves from the colonial/postcolonial framework, while introducing a third, the decolonial, as the imaginary through which history could be re-written by paying particular attention to the experience of the marginalised, “that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are organized” and the imaginary “conjures fragmented identities, fragmented realities, that are ‘real,’ but a real that is in question” (Perez 1999:6).

And the Chicana/feminine identity is such a marginalised instance. This marginalised position, both in the psycho-social background of the community and in the Western literary tradition, has always given the Chicana female subject various labels. It is in fact these labels that the Chicana feminists have to deal with, before and while introducing ‘the decolonial’.

The well-known Freudian concept of the ‘castration complex’ is challenged primarily by feminists, regardless of their racial attributes, as it constitutes one of the first instances of a male intellectual discriminative position.

The fact that the male subject has been rigidly fixed in the common understanding as superior to the female subject is a result not only of the impositions of tradition, but also of the recognition of the latter as justified and ‘scientifically’ explainable, a characteristic which both Freud and Lacan have contributed to. In this way, the ‘castration complex’ might be considered to have become, through the scientific praise that Freud received, an almost involuntary response to gender differentiation, a reflex.

Judith Butler offers another analysis of identity from a poststructuralist view that is helpful in discussing Chicana rewritings of gender (Butler 1990). Instead of seeing gender identity as a result of linguistic construction, she uses the ideas of agency and performance, defining gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts” (33). Her aim is to justify the assumption according to which female identity is self-stylised, and that by repeated acts/performances it creates the illusion of an essentialised identity. What is even more important for the analysis of the Chicana female subject is the fact that Butler relates performance to an “act of conscious affiliation”, rather than to natural reasons.

The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken.

My argument is that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed (Butler1990:142).

Butler's concept of gender performance could therefore be extrapolated to a series of 'deeds' that involve the construction of a specific identity, even though that identity is fragmented in itself. The 'doers' perform the fragmentation in order to render explicit their discontent with the others performances, perpetuated by history and repetition. Performing as Chicanas, the feminists deny the Freudian assumptions of inferiority just as much as they make a political statement of self-determination. Although they might perform their true selves (if that notion could still be maintained without essentialising it), the Chicanas do so in a mediated manner, consciously assuming the role language and previous situations have in shaping their current being. The female subject in the borderlands responds to the historical moment and the way in which it has been conceptualised by others by wearing the mask of fragmentary identity and by employing a set of strategies that further perpetuate that fragmentariness. The Chicana writers and theorists thus employ a set of female subject positions of which some are performed in response to the phallocentric order, while others are performed in an undisclosed manner, so as to contribute to the complexity of instances the feminine can manifest itself in. To this end, they employ a set of images, 'drags' in Butler's terms, which may be seen as constituting a taxonomy of female subject positions characteristic of the Chicana environment.

In order to sustain the extent to which these categories respond to the previously mentioned 'dichotomous categories', it is, however, unavoidable to also look at the male configuration of the topic. Although the Chicano movement is primarily concerned with the ethnic polarisation of American society and culture, and hence the marginalisation of minority subjects, there are tendencies towards including or excluding gender performance, depending on the identity assumed at a particular moment. The male configurations of identity inevitably respond, in their turn, to the development of feminist theories within the Mexican-American environment, and while some preserve stereotypic female imagery in a 'traditional' manner, others tend to incorporate a different approach to femaleness, as they (un)willingly portray instances of empowered women.

In this context of Chicano and Chicana performances of identity, to place them together would help to express not only the affiliations they establish in performing the Mexican-American identity, but also the assumption that gender differentiation is not necessarily bound to dissipate one, but rather to help perform both. As Mexican-American identity in general, and female subjectivity in particular, is constructed on the bases of fragmentation, the slash in ‘Chicano/a’ is actually a unifying principle, however paradoxical that may sound, in that it places an emphasis on the “infinite divisions” (Rebolledo 1993) that might actually unite.

Towards a taxonomy of the female subject

Without purporting to be exhaustive, the discussion of the female encounters in the Chicano/a literary environment could encompass a number of recurring images. On the one hand, they serve the previously exposed principle of identity performance, aiming to establish themselves as counter-prototypes to the male+dominated tradition. On the other, some of them are inferred from the constant preoccupation of female authors predominantly to generate a new terminology to define and identify the Chicana.

In this respect, Maria Herrera-Sobeck’s *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (1990), based on more than three thousand *corridos* (which are considered the most traditional and representative forms of artistic expression in the Chicano environment) explores five major female archetypes: the Good Mother, the Terrible Mother, the Virgin of Guadalupe, The Lover—both faithful and treacherous— and the Soldadera. Most of these archetypes represent both positive (Good Mother, Virgin of Guadalupe, Faithful Lover) and negative (Terrible Mother, Treacherous Lover – La Llorona, La Malinche) examples of feminine prototypes that have influenced the general and (self)perception of women in the borderlands. The final one, however, reconfigures “positive female behavior” to include political agency in the form of armed struggle for the revolution. It is this *soldadera*, somehow portrayed by the corridos as a possible feminine instance, that occupies most of Herrera-Sobeck’s study, in order to show that the gender roles assigned by the patriarchal system allow for a certain praise of the woman who goes beyond traditional gender roles, even within the male-dominated community. However, she goes on to explore the ways in which this incipient form of

liberation is dealt with by male authors, apparently abandoned by strongly-oriented social ones (such as Luis Valdez's portrayal of women as voiceless others), and concludes that both traditional and non-traditional gender roles are based on the assumption of heterosexuality, which generates oppression on multiple levels: as members of a minority group, as females, and as inheritors of a culture that tends to be dominated by males. In a performance of authorship, Herrera-Sobeck manages to take one first step in issuing a taxonomy of the female presence in the borderlands, all the while providing the comparative approach of 'traditional' and postmodern analysis.

When expanding this taxonomy of the female subject positions in Chicano/a literary production, some other 'categories' can be included, depending on whether one is guided by the revisionist or the innovative principle. The revisionist performances include legendary female figures, rediscovered by the Chicana as being the initial perpetrators of the 'castration complex': La Virgen de Guadalupe, la Malinche, La Llorona and the other Catholic or Indian/Aztec deities serve as objective instances of oppression. These are symbols that the 'spectators' can easily recognise, and a re-enactment of their patriarchal nature under the light of the feminist atmosphere of the movement enables the latter to re-evaluate their validity as solid figures of ideology. Furthermore, the incorporation of general terms that have been traditionally associated with a subaltern position (such as daughter, wife, or even mother, lover/mistress and female worker) functions as yet another re-enactment. By assigning the female subjects the role they have stereotypically been confined to, the Chicana female writer tries to display the possibility of change. And in most cases, change is a synonym for creation, initially in terms of language and eventually of identity. The innovative principle functions on the same level of performance, but while tradition is assumed as drag in order to strip it off, the 'new' female identities are proudly performed, at times at extensive levels. They include the *soldadera* image that Herrera-Sobeck enlarged upon in her analysis, but also Gloria Anzaldua's *new mestiza* or Ana Castillo's *Xicanista*, overall the prototype of the empowered, self-confident woman, able to negotiate an in-between space from which to reconfigure the male/female dichotomy. In the same creative endeavour, the issue of lesbianism seems to function as the ultimate performance that challenges the validity and consistency of the male-normative discourse. Queer theory, as

reflected in the works of the Chicana, interrogates not only categories of sexual orientation but also the social constructedness of male/female relationships and their susceptibility to change. All these purport to be subsequent images of the feminine principle, in order to justify the fragmentariness of an identity in the making, which is never stable yet always somehow in opposition to the 'canonic' imaginary. What is noteworthy in the realm of feminist readings by Chicana is the fact that they rarely give up antagonism to the male completely. The Chicano writer, on the other hand, rarely focuses willingly on female stereotypes, which is why the fractured identities of women are still present, even though not emphasised. When bringing out the female in a male-dominated narrative structure, the performance is still one of difference, but leaves room for undisclosed developments. In a sense, writings such as those of Luis Valdez, Jimmy Santiago Baca or Rolando Hinojosa contribute to female revisionism by reinforcing the positions that the Chicanas are aiming at deconstructing.

Female indigenous imagery

The rewriting of myth, which necessarily entails rewriting ideology and cultural norms, operates within the theoretical framework of Chicano/a cultural criticism. Certain stories have been created and perpetuated in order to subordinate the female image to the ascribed phallocentric order, and some of them have evolved independently, up to the point where the mythic/unreal can no longer be separated from the reality of the status quo.

The three most eminent figures of Chicano/a culture, La Malinche, La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe, demarcate the patriarchal boundaries of feminine behaviour, and their legitimisation comes from the combination of indigenous and Catholic traditional views. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa states:

La gente Chicana tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother who we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two [...] In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and la Llorona to make us longsuffering people.

(30)

Acknowledging these figures as portraying the female subject in a subaltern position, the Chicana feminists point out the ‘distortions’ of the patriarchal system, as “feminism is a way of saying that nothing in patriarchy truly reflects women unless we accept distortions – mythic and historical” (Alarcón 1982:189). The revisionist Chicana sets out to recognize these distortions and perform a shift in ideology by deconstructing the stereotype.

La Malinche, the Mayan translator who worked for Hernán Cortés, is probably one of the most condemned figures in Chicano culture. Her story as a translator for the conquistadores was turned into “his-story” of a traitor to her people. It has come to incorporate the idea of betrayal of nationhood, as a consequence of uncontrollable sexual desire. In a way, la Malinche is the incarnation of the Freudian subject, driven by her libido. Her knowledge of two languages and her ability to learn Spanish, which eventually led to her translating for Cortes, enabled her to become a mediator between the Aztecs and the Spanish. She was Cortes’ mistress and presumably the mother of the first *mestiza* when she gave birth to a daughter. As Norma Alarcón states in her study of La Malinche, the story evolved into portraying an intelligent young woman into an “evil goddess and creator of a new race [...] mother-whore, bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the foreign Spanish invasion” (182). She is “the Mexican Eve” (188), whose weakness led to the destruction of the Aztec empire (the lost paradise of Mexican culture). One of the most contested instances of La Malinche theory is Octavio Paz’s “The Sons of La Malinche”, which nonetheless offers an insight into the way in which the story has influenced male perception of the Mexican woman, from within the borders of the ethnic community: “violated mother [...] Her passivity is abject: she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood, and dust. Her taint is constitutional and resides, as we said earlier, in her sex [...] And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition” (208).

La Llorona, the “Weeping Woman,” the second of the Mexican mythic figures, bears some similarities to La Malinche, in that it defines womanhood as monstrous, incapable of control. There are numerous variants of the myth, but all of them describe a

woman who is sexually abused and betrayed by a man she still longs for and after going mad kills all her children and haunts creeks, wailing in pain.

Both La Malinche and La Llorona are failed mothers, and while some see La Llorona as merely another incarnation of La Malinche, the origins of her myth precede the Spanish conquest. Américo Paredes elaborates on the legend as striking “deep roots in the Mexican tradition because it was grafted on an Indian [Nahuatl] legend cycle about the supernatural woman who seduces men when they are out alone on the roads or working in the fields” (103). At times, the same myth has been associated with that of the ‘Woman Serpent’, a Toltec deity said to walk through the city at night, whose wails were considered an omen of war (Stavans 2007). Chicana feminist theory has placed a great emphasis on these two female images as they served to reinforce the idea of woman as inherently sinful, similar to the Catholic belief. Cherrie Moraga (1983) suggests that in this way the image of womanhood is turned into an “aberration, a criminal against nature” (145) and that the male order is installed on the basis of this assumption.

In contrast to these images of female evil, the figure of the Virgen of Guadalupe comes as yet another patriarchally-imposed figure. In what seems to have been the story of an Aztec fertility and earth goddess, the Catholic ideology found the imagery that could help Christianise the colonised people. Guadalupe has gained extreme importance for the Chicano/a culture as she has become a unique deity, a combination of the Virgin Mary and Coatlicue/Tonantzin. Her special features of being a nurturer and protector of all Mexicans regardless of gender made her a more “attractive” role model; even for the revisionist Chicana, its story of the oxymoronic origin of life and death (in Aztec mythology) enabled a counter-narrative of female matriarchal power.

The perpetuation of these archetypal images “pervades not only male thought, but ours too as it seeps into our own consciousness in the cradle through their eyes as well as our mothers’, who are entrusted with the transmission of culture” (Alarcón 1982:183). The internalised myth follows the generations, and even though the stories themselves are rendered unbelievable by contemporary notions of the unreal, they have instilled into the Chicano/a consciousness a negative way of characterising the feminine.

However, the mythological figures have served the Chicana authors in their attempt to reconceptualise the Mexican woman, as they turn them into “symbols of

resistance'. But while for Chicanos this resistance is directed against Anglo domination, for the Chicanas the figures are problematic in that they do not correspond to the reality of a new border performance. While for the Mexican *macho* the female figures are non-conflictual, for the Chicanas they are more than so, and writers like Sandra Cisneros acknowledge this by saying that: "Part of being [Chicana] is that love and that affinity we have for our culture [...] [Yet] I felt, as a teenager, that I could not inherit my culture intact without revising some parts of it [...] We accept our culture, but not without adapting it to ourselves as women" (Arnada 66).

By taking a stand on the mythological perspectives inflicted by traditional male-hegemonic structures, Chicana authors allow themselves to perform the fragmentary identity of the mestiza. They maintain a link with the traditions and stories that they associate with Mexican culture while still asserting a female perspective, incorporating both positive and negative elements.

The female legendary figures are constant in their presence as Chicana revisionist symbols. Whether subjects of theoretical insight (*Goddess of the Americas, Our Lady of Controversy*), or as performances associated with a symbolic order (in Ana Castillo's *So far from God* 1993), these figures are constantly referred to as being fragmented identities that cannot be confined to a single authoritarian position but rather serve as shifting elements of the Chicana identity. Once a 'Virgen', afterwards a modern Malinche, the Chicana feels as if she is no longer bound to the stereotype and thus can reinterpret the symbols according to her own momentum.

The 'regular' woman

From the emblematic figures of Aztec and Catholic tradition, the Chicana female subject reveals itself as complicated and poses the question of reversibility. On the one hand, the 'goddesses' might have been images of regular women turned into myth. Marina Warner (*Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* 1976) speaks of the Virgin being "one of the few female figures to have attained the status of a myth—a myth that for nearly two thousand years has coursed through our culture, as spirited and often as imperceptible as an underground stream" (xxv). Or feminine behaviour has been shaped by iconic figures inflicted with patriarchal 'commandments'.

In each of the cases, however, the idea of ‘the regular woman’ in Chicano/a culture complies with the normative aspects of the male-dominated ideology. The term ‘regular’ becomes significant in itself when discussing the female position, as from the notion of an attribute of something being ‘in conformity with a fixed principle’ it has evolved into designating a ‘common, usual and normal trait’. Feminists in general and Chicanas in particular struggle to charge these ‘regular’ images of women as mothers, daughters and sisters, etc. with yet a different set of energies, guided by a “possible vision for social change”: “I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become,” explains Anzaldua in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (71). By challenging and transforming old myths, the new *mestiza* participates in the collective birth of a new culture:

I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. (80-81)

Sandra Cisneros calls this attempt to re-fashion the regular woman a result of the ‘trauma’ of ‘reinventing ourselves’ (Aranda 1990:66), and other critics identify the symbolic figures as ‘reference points’ used ‘not only for controlling, interpreting, or visualizing women, but also to wage a domestic battle of stifling proportions’ (Alarcon 1982:182). While the stereotypical roles have been assigned to enforce the values of chastity, humility, self-sacrifice and longsuffering motherhood for women, the Chicanas try to add the values of strength, endurance, intelligence and tolerance, on the basis of female creativity. In *Nepantla. Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993) Pat Mora elaborates on the different ‘regular’ positions the female has in the Chicana culture and calls for a ‘shift in meaning’ for all the terms designating the women of the Chicana culture:

You will find yourself disoriented at times by the use of the word *we*. I know the feeling. I purposely let the meaning shift and slide as it does in my life. Who are the *we* of me? My family, writers, Chicanas, Southwesterners, mothers, women of color, daughters, Latinas, college graduates, Hispanas, wives, Mexicans, U.S. citizens, readers, advocates, Mexican Americans, women, educators, learners? [...] And the *we* of us is a problem. [...] These labels produce strong

reactions. Our labels continue to evolve. We cannot allow them to separate us and must grant one another the right to name ourselves. Given all that confronts us, we need to avoid the convenient trap of using linguistic debates to resist the discomfort of change, of learning to work with those who share our dissatisfaction with our cities, states, nation, the new world that is supposedly being ordered. [...]Labels and labelers, the power of naming, do, of course, merit our scrutiny. (Mora 1993:7)

In the work of Chicanos, the female subject is persistently seen in terms of these 'regular' types: either as a 'good' woman (a sister, mother, granddaughter, daughter, wife) or as a 'bad' woman who deviates from the norm (the aggressive 'masculine' woman, the sexually driven whore, the alienated daughter). Nevertheless, some new writings especially of urban-raised authors indicate that Chicanos are beginning to write in a less dichotomous manner, in what has been called (Mirandé and Enríquez 1977) a 'spirited' image of the female as consciously deviant from the cultural norms of her community and of the patriarchal system in general.

Nonetheless, deviance does not take a revisionist form unless this is purposely done through a performance of difference. The Chicanas employ various 'unnamed' women stereotypes in their pursuit of the same goal of modifying the patriarchal status quo and furthermore of educating younger generations in the equalitarian, if not reversed order of gender dichotomy. The Chicana female subjects are strikingly submissive at times, in order to allow for an even more striking evolution towards self-determination.

An awareness of the difficulty of dealing with such regularly associated typologies is preserved, and at times irony serves as a counter-balancing device. What cannot be changed *per se*, or the alteration in the patriarchal vision of the female would take too long, is rendered unavailing, so that the 'rule' is still contested. Furthermore, the re-evaluation of female 'regularity' brings about a change in male portrayal as well. The Chicano role-model of the *macho* is fuelled with negative connotations of violence and lack of intellectual abilities, so as to signal a reversal in stereotypes. The Chicana, although at times not explicitly, becomes a positive figure by contrast with the male uncontrollable drives to (self)impose. The mistress stereotype is turned into the positive one of lover, for instance, by adding the value of honesty and the inability to escape *machismo*.

It is noteworthy to refer in this context to an interesting subject position the Chicanas assume, that of the victim. While acknowledging the inferior position women have had throughout the evolution of the Chicano culture, the Chicanas apparently enact, to certain degree, a victimisation of the present subject: “you will hear many voices speaking, questioning our public discourse, affirming the right of Latinas and Latinos to be heard, to participate in shaping the future of this country. [...] No one of us committed to social change lives a serene, lyrical life.”(86) The victim position is twice relevant for the Chicana, as it resonates on both sides of the social environment. On the one hand, it enables women to resonate with the political and cultural activism of the (self)proclaimed representatives of their culture (the Chicana feminists), while on the other, it provides the ‘promise’ of a better future for those committed to standing up and trying to make room for their own subjectivity and agency. And in order to provide a way out of the victim position, numerous Chicana authors strive to formulate theories of new identities, performing the role of ‘facilitators’ for those oscillating in their quest for a liberated identity.

The new mestiza

Herrera-Sobeck’s *soldadera* image is one of the examples of this facilitating performance. By emphasising the role women play in the development of a traditional male-narrated story of the border, the cultural critic reinserts the female subject in its apparently rightful place. The *soldadera* is still an archetype, but one that has consciously been omitted from most of the analysis of the *corrido*, as it posed no question of evolution: “The *soldadera* was forced to fade into the woodwork by male leaders who, taking complete control, encouraged women to return to the home and become, once again, mothers and daughters. It was easier to glorify the *soldadera* and to mythify her than to grant her the vote.”(116). Women are thus prevented from pursuing an independent attitude, as the patriarchal tradition emphasises the mystifying elements of such an archetype and not on female strength and masculinity.

The concept is similar in this way to Ana Castillo’s *Xicanista* theory as developed in the ten essays of *Massacre of the Dreamers*. Castillo offers a valuable critique of mainstream feminism from which, she argues, Chicanas feel justifiably alienated. She

uses concepts such as “the feminine principle” and defines it through the “Mother-Bond Principle” (223) or “the Virgen de Guadalupe/Tonantzin - the feminine principle within ourselves” (88), which binds all activist mestiza feminists or “Xicanistas” together (204).

Thus the female subject, or “the feminine” is always considered in relation to ethnicity and culture but not always in relation to class. The process of identity formation central to Castillo’s work is linked not only to a genetic hybridity but to a cultural hybridity. The two, however, become intertwined in the particular trait of women, their spirituality: “[T]his undercurrent of spirituality - which has been with woman since pre-Conquest times and which precedes Christianity in Europe - is the unspoken key to her strength and endurance as a female throughout all the ages” (95). In fact, the mestiza’s identity is defined by this spirituality (95) along with her sexuality (136). By emphasising the negative effects of Catholicism and Marxist theory, Castillo attacks them as being “doctrines that are inherently male dominated” (87). Her challenge to patriarchal institutions has to do with the image of Tonantzin/Virgin of Guadalupe, as the single dual (Aztec/Catholic) embodiment of the “feminine principle”. Furthermore, Castillo comes to define the modern theoretical and political *soldadera* by using her *Xicanista* term, encompassing social and cultural activism and female spirituality. The Xicanista is ‘at a crossroads’ where she decides to no longer deal with male intellectual power and to reintroduce the creativity principle for which she stands:

Here is the juncture in our story where I believe Xicanisma is formed: in the acknowledgement of the historical crossroad where the creative power of woman became deliberately appropriated by male society and woman in the flesh, thereafter, was subordinated. It is our task as Xicanistas, to not only reclaim our indigenismo - but also to reinsert the forsaken feminine into our consciousness. (12)

Furthermore, the *Xicanista* calls for action on multiple levels and provides the positive vision of a less patriarchal future: “I define the activista as Xicanista, when her flesh, mind and soul serve as the lightning rod for the confluence of her consciousness. Xicanistas may also arrive at this consciousness from roads other than the ones discussed

here, to be sure; and one generation later, young Xicanistas are contending with the polemics of the Bush-Reagan years that affected their generation” (93).

Last but not least, Gloria Anzaldua’s *new mestiza* consciousness seems to have been the most influential of the Chicana modern female types. The *mestiza* consciousness, in Gloria Anzaldua’s terms, “is a product of crossbreeding”, of mixing Mexican heritage with Indian and Western blood, all the while departing from any simple genetic determination. It is a cultural construct intended to define the experience of those women of mixed origin, balancing at the crossroads between multiple ideologies, conflicting personal quests with the (self)imposed rules of the community. The role of the *mestiza* is that of actively working towards the creation of a new space to call her own, a space in which she will be able to reassign racial and gender roles. Therefore, for Anzaldua, being a *mestiza* is not only a name-bearing for a hybrid of races, but also of a special type of cultural activism – “The mestiza documents the struggle [...]. She reinterprets history, and using new symbols she shapes new myths.” (Anzaldua1987:6). Her *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) focuses on mestizaje and hybridity in a “woman centered narrative” (Quintana1996:127) in a performative strategy of offering a feminine version of the mythology of masculine cultural nationalism. Anzaldua’s self-fashioning quest and her commitment to “ancient indigenous culture” (127) are a conscious effort to construct a new mestiza community, hence a new identity for the Chicana female subject, one that is able to tolerate and incorporate difference and no longer resents the masculine but rather ignores it. In a prospect world depicted by a fragmented narrative of female consciousness, Anzaldua hopes to integrate ‘ambiguities’ and recover the harmonious atmosphere of indigenous pre-historic times. Hers is probably the most elaborate account of how Chicana identity is able to function within the newly issued revisionist atmosphere of the feminist movement, as it also incorporates the idea of lesbianism, as the (in)voluntary response to the patriarchally constructed identity that has been ascribed to the female subject through tradition and ideology.

Conclusion

The female subject re-configuring within the Chicana feminist literary tradition poses the duality of exclusion/re-integration within a traditional framework. Both narratives and theoretical texts originating in the “marginal” space of the Chicano

community have been systematically excluded from traditional American literary history. Being a Chicana feminist writer is thus another way of responding to oppression, but by forcing the 'other' (in this case tradition) to accept the interventions of a different community (namely the Mexican American one).

The female subjects of the borderlands, both in their social and theoretical construction, have assumed a new position in respect to their counterparts. Although initially concerned with revising stereotypes, a feature which is still to be observed on a subsequent level in recent writings by Chicanas, contemporary literary and artistic representations of the Chicana female subject no longer comply with that initial mode of expression – revolt. Instead, Chicanas nowadays (as writers, academics, or characters portrayed in books) have already reached a state of political and self-awareness which enables them to claim a different role and give up the set of “modifiers” traditionally associated with the gendered 'other'.

A taxonomy of the female subject in the borderlands is thus bound to focus on both the 'traditional' imagery, re-performed by the Chicanas in order for it to be deconstructed, as well as on neo-constructivist imagery. By formulating theories of difference, the Chicana female subject becomes a mediator between the canonical perceptions inflicted by Freudian psychoanalysis and the postmodern approaches to gender performativity. From being a 'traitor' through translation (Alarcon 1989:57-87), the female subject regains its creativity and is able to initiate another trajectory for its further existence in the no longer male-dominated world.

Although not exhaustively, this analysis of the female subject in the borderlands has revealed a set of images that could configure this taxonomy, in both literary and theoretical writings by Chicanos/as. The categories identified correspond to the three major preoccupations of the Chicana feminists. In revising tradition, they employ legendary figures such as La Virgen de Guadalupe/ Tonantzin, La Malinche, La Llorona in order to deconstruct their patriarchal upbringing as female 'role-models'. Revisionism also entails a different approach to the 'regularity' of female subject positions as mothers, daughters or wives, by striving to charge them with a new set of meanings. By writing their own 'myths', Chicanas are going beyond the patriarchal 'ruling' power and issuing a new code with which to denominate the female experience. Lastly, the third category of

femaleness in the borderlands encompasses new identities, fragmented and re-constructed from the perspective of a self-conscious individual. The *soldadera*, *Xicanista* or *the new mestiza* stand for the evolutionary tendencies the postmodern subject implies, all the while incorporating race, ethnicity and sexuality in defining the female.

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