

Chicana Narrative: The Borderland as a Footnote to Sandra Cisneros

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Chicana poet and writer Gloria Anzaldua presents the United States-Mexican border as a place in which two cultures merge and create a border culture. In her book *Borderlands*, she privileges the border culture and tries to define a borderland consciousness in terms of cross-pollination of race, ideology, and culture.¹ To put it differently, Anzaldua, although taking the risk of essentialism, probes into and eventually praises hybridity. Historically, the borderlands of the Southwest and the West were the place of political and cultural contention. The borderland or the boundary is usually the place of contention in a rhetorical context as well as a banal context of political engagement.² Positioning herself in the borderland, Anzaldua searches out her identity and justifies her hybridity.

At a time of multiculturalism or multiethnicism in the United States, the problem of identity brings up the particular issues such as race, gender, and culture. Thus the particularism claims its existence in order to present an oppositional view-point or grounding against the monolithic value system. Many critics are forced to historicize, contextualize, and pluralize literature. However, concerned with the identity in multicultural surroundings, we continuously shape and rethink the definition of what an American is. Then we notice that a kind of nationalism or nativism creeps into the discourse of identity construction. To pick up the problem of the borderland, we may confront the ambivalent intersection between multiculturalism which claims diversity, and nationalism which singles out a monolithic value. Immigrants confront identity construction between two cultures in a crystallized form. Do they circumvent the vacillation between their original culture and adopted culture? If they feel unease with the adopted culture, they may be critical of the national culture which is created and handed down by education. Here we may bring up the opposition between affinity and affiliation. On the one hand, they may feel affinity with their original culture and, on the other hand, they are affiliated with the adopted culture through institutionalized education. Sandra Cisneros's stories represent the dilemmas of affinity and affiliation. These dilemmas represent one dynamic aspect of the relationship between description (culture) and prescription (nature). The issue of affinity and affiliation stems from the distance between description and prescription. As Anzaldua suggests, the vacillation between two cultures finds expression in the borderland consciousness. It can be possible to penetrate the superficialities of cultural particularism by

examining the meaning of the borderland consciousness as a reflection of the distance between description and prescription. The borderland consciousness destabilizes the dominant discourse which dictates our affiliation with the description of the national culture. The distance between description and prescription creates a sense of cultural otherness and subsumes the oppositional position within the national culture.

Homi Bhabha suggests that “the borderland engagement of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual.”³ Cisneros’s tone is ironic toward American as well as Mexican culture, echoing Bhabha’s phrase. We may consider Cisneros’s irony as an attempt to capture and overcome cultural diversity. Cisneros’s irony forces us to think about the issue of the community which establishes the ground to share irony. Wayne Booth sets up the notion of stable irony. According to him, stable irony establishes itself as an communal achievement.⁴ We may extend such communal achievement to a sense of community in which we share irony. In such a community irony is shared by both ironists and the readers or audiences. We can imagine this community as amiable one. Although Cisneros’s irony is shared in multicultural surroundings, multicultural community has not yet established as amiable. The notion of the borderland works to examine such a community. While her irony has overtones of cynicism, such a bitter taste commands us to face the problem of cultural difference which is an index of sympathy as well as enmity. In multicultural surroundings, can we really share irony? Some may feel irony through intuition and others may feel irony through knowledge of cultural difference. While Cisneros feels affinity and affiliation, we, the reader, can question whether we understand her irony through our affinity or affiliation with the borderland consciousness. In examining the issue of affinity and affiliation, or sympathy and conflict in Cisneros’s stories, we may pay attention to the transformation of indigenous myths and the image of home, both of which can suggest the way in which we read Chicana narrative in a broader context which goes beyond a mere cultural understanding.

In the works of Chicana feminist writers, Mexican social myths are embedded in their context and haunt their consciousness. Although probing into the meanings of the Mexican myths tends to be ethnographic, the influence of such ethnographic myths becomes crucial in shaping the Chicana writer’s consciousness. Our primary concern is the transformation of such myths between two cultures. The function of the myths is a central issue in arguing American imagination which represents America as a new land then and now. Following Sacvan Bercovitch, we usually think that American myths enclose social ideas and shape the national culture. However, modern, or post-modern reading deconstructs the function of myths and articulates the process of mythmaking. The transformation of Mexican myths into American context reveals one aspect of the contentious position of social myths. Such transformation simultaneously represents the ongoing construction and deconstruction of American identity.

Sandra Cisneros feels herself as an outsider in American context; however, her position

significantly reveals the necessary conflict in creating a new identity in America. Cisneros tells in her interview that she was brought up under the strong influence of Mexican social myths: Guadalupe, Malinche, and la Llorona. Actually, these three figures haunt Cisneros's stories. La Virgen de Guadalupe is a symbol of the chaste protective mother, the defender of the Mexican people, stemming both from the indigenous religious belief and Catholicism. According to Anzaldua, Guadalupe is "the most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/Mexican." Also, Guadalupe works as a mediator between the Spanish and the Indian culture. She represents a valuable juncture of hybridity. Malinche, an Aztec princess sold into slavery, works for Cortez as an translator. She gave birth to his son, "the first mestiza, of mixed Indian and Spanish parentage." Because of sexual complicity, Malinche was considered as a betrayer after the independence. She represents colonized woman's sexuality in a paradoxical context of a victimizer and a negotiator. La Llorona is a symbol of a feeble mother who wails for her drowned children. We will discuss about the transformation of these myths by taking up Malinche and La Llorona in Cisneros's stories.

Cisneros questions these figures' femininity and reinterprets the meaning of the femininity. In so doing, she tries to fit their femininity into her identity as a legitimate American woman. Cisneros gets caught up with the double bind through the myth of Malinche. Malinche's loyalty to nation is entwined in her sexuality which leads her to take a double role; a mitigator and traitor toward Mexican culture. In "Never Marry a Mexican," Cisneros depicts a provocative female character. In this story, Clemencia is a daughter of Mexican father and Mexican-American mother and she keeps affairs with married men. Her mother advises her never to marry a Mexican and she decides not to marry any man. Her antagonism toward marriage stems from her parents' failed marriage between a woman who was born here in the United States and a man who was born there in Mexico. When Cisneros depicts two cultures, she contrasts a Mexican in the United States with a Mexican in Mexico. When Clemencia's father came to the United States, he worked 'shelling clams, washing dishes, and planting hedges.' One day, he "sat on the back of the bus in Little Rock and had the bus driver shout, You—sit up here [*sic*], and my father had shrugged sheepishly and said, No speak English [*sic*]" (70). However, Clemencia's father is not an economic refugee. His days in Mexico are described in a nostalgic tone which suggests aristocracy. The displacement of Mexican culture into the United States suggests some humiliation through her father's degenerate ending. Although Cisneros herself experiences the Mexican culture through her grandparents, she conceives that the transformed culture cannot be same as the original one. Clemencia feels that her father is a victim of social and cultural difference and that her mother is a shrewd victor between two cultures.

Clemencia represents a mixture of a cultural victim and a sexual negotiator. The reader is led to associate Clemencia with Malinche (Malinalli) through the conversation between Clemencia and her lover Drew: "Drew, remember when you used to call me your Malinalli?"

It was a joke, a private game between us, because you looked like Cortez with that beard of yours. My skin dark against yours [*sic*]. Beautiful you said” (74). Cisneros depicts an intercourse of man and woman as a confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized like the myth of Malinche, along with adding the aspect of aesthetic judgment through the interpretation or transformation of the myth of Malinche. In this scene exoticism makes Drew feel for Clemencia’s dark skin.⁵ Cisneros highlights both biological hierarchy and cultural hierarchy in terms of aesthetics through the relationship between Clemencia and Drew.

As mythical figure Malinche negotiates her sexuality with white male Cortez and eventually gives birth to a son, Clemencia has Drew’s son in her power as her new lover. Although Malinche is now seen as a sexually exploited victim and estranged from the Mexican people, Clemencia aspires to solidarity with human beings. In the final lines of the story, she appeals: “Human beings pass me on the street, and I want to reach out and strum them as if they were guitars. Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely. I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say there, there, it’s all right, honey. There, there, there” (83). As Jean Wyatt argues, these lines denote motherhood as a process of nurturing and consoling.⁶ Surely adultery on the one hand and motherhood on the other hand exist entirely in this story as the mutually entwined context.

Clemencia’s mother remarries a white man after her husband’s death. This causes Clemencia’s loss of the right to her own house and mother: “When she married that white man, and he and his boys moved into my father’s house, it was as if she stopped being my mother. Like I never even had one” (73). This situation imbues Clemencia with a sense of loss. Deciding not to marry, Clemencia keeps affairs with married men. Clemencia became Drew’s mistress when she was his student. After Drew left her, she happened to have an affair with his son. During this time, she makes his son an object of her painting. Clemencia, thus claims a surrogate motherhood to her young lover, Drew’s son. Her defiance of marriage eventually makes her nobody’s mother. However, Clemencia never ceases to have affairs with other married men. When their wives give birth to their children, Clemencia is vicariously involved in their conception and gestation by having physical relationships with their husbands. On the one hand, Clemencia feels motherhood as a woman; on the other hand, she is unscrupulous about her lovers’ wives. Clemencia is so harsh to Drew’s wife because she is a white middle class woman: “If she was a brown woman like me, I might’ve had a harder time living with myself, but since she’s not. I don’t care. . . . I don’t care about his wife. She’s not *my* sister” (76). Clemencia’s rejection of Drew’s wife accounts for her defiance of marriage as well as race/class barrier. Clemencia reveals her ambivalent feelings toward biological kinship which implicates ethnicity on the one hand and the relationship between mother and child on the other.

Clemencia never forgets her mother’s saying: “Never marry a Mexican.” While this

keeps her outside of marriage or institution of marriage, she is forced to confront her ethnicity. The mythical image of Malinche underscores women's sexuality in relation to cultural difference. While Malinche is blamed for her sexual passivity which obscures loyalty to her original culture and the woman's chastity, Cisneros presents Clemencia as a woman who acts on her aggressive sexuality. The feminist approach enunciates this transformation as a shift of feminine discourse into masculine discourse. Thus Clemencia represents the subversion of gender codes. However, Clemencia cannot eradicate her cultural code which dictates her to be defiant of the dominant discourse. The reinterpretation of Malinche in terms of gender and cultural codes reveals the ironic situation of the Chicana subject. Once she is honest to her individual desire, Clemencia necessarily objects to marriage which will provide a junction between culture and gender for her. However, she has to victimize her lover's wife.

As Clemencia's aggressive sexuality follows a sense of betrayal, identity construction in two cultures faces in many ways a sense of betrayal.⁷ In "Woman Hollering Creek," Cisneros presents "a story of betrayal" in an ironic way centering on a woman whose identity awakens. A female protagonist Cleofilas imagines her adulthood or womanhood according to the contemporary Mexican telenovelas. We can easily conceive other women who create their future on such televised stories and dream of obtaining affectionate husbands through a series of romantic sufferings. However, they have to confront harsh reality. We may pay attention to the following passage:

Felice! This poor lady's got black-and-blue marks all over, I'm not kidding.

From her husband. Who Else? Another one of those brides from across the border. And her family's all in Mexico.

Shit. You think they're going to help her? Give me a break. This lady doesn't even speak English. She hasn't been allowed to call home or write or nothing. That's why I'm calling you. (54)

Cleofilas's sympathizers generalize and diminish her as "another one of those brides." This phrase suggests that Cleofilas is only one of those who married across the border and eventually suffered domestic violence by their husbands. For Cleofilas, crossing the border is a demarcation of transformation. She crosses the border of two cultures and daughterhood. After crossing the border, she experiences a disillusionment or a feeling of failure. Cleofilas images her womanhood by identifying herself with the fictional romantic figure in Mexican telenovela. Cleofilas, however, notices that her husband is the enemy of her womanhood. Moreover, she realizes that neither her new community in America nor her old community in Mexico can help her. They are just communities of gossip. Cleofilas feels a sense of betrayal towards her husband and her communities. The next description provides an ironic contrast to Clemencia's situation:

A doubt. Slender as a hair. A washed cup set back on the shelf wrong-side-up. Her lipstick, and body talc, and hairbrush all arranged in the bathroom a different way.

No. Her imagination. The house the same as always. Nothing.

Coming home from the hospital with her new son, her husband. Something comforting in discovering her house slippers beneath the bed, the faded housecoat where she left in on the bathroom hook. Her pillow. Their bed.

Sweet sweet homecoming. Sweet as the scent of face powder in the air, jasmine, sticky liquor.

Smudged fingerprint on the door. Crushed cigarette in a glass. Wrinkle in the brain crumpling to a crease. (50)

We seem to witness the reverse of the betrayed wife's situation by comparing it with Clemencia's adultery. Women are positioned in the shifting place between the victim and the victimizer because of masculine discourse.

In "Women in Hollering Creek," Cisneros brings up La Llorona as a mythical icon representing Cleofilas's vulnerability. Cleofilas identifies herself with La Llorona when she weeps by the creek as La Llorona did. However, getting the helpmate who liberates her from her husband, Cleofilas expunges this mythical icon from her identity construction. Instead of weeping, she giggles at the creek when her helpmate drives her to the bus stop bounded for her home country. The image which implicates Cleofilas's identification changes from the Mexican mythical figure to the pop masculine icon Tarzan:

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

Pues, look how cute, I scared you two, right? Sorry. Should've warned you. Every time I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I holler. She said this in a Spanish pocked with English and laughed. Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she's the Virgin. I guess you're only famous if you're a virgin. She was laughing again.

That's why I like the name of that *arroyo*. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right? (55)

In the final scene Cleofilas identifies herself with Felice and laughs at the creek. However, we may notice an irony in this laughter, because Cleofilas has no other place than her father's house which is depicted as an affective but patriarchal family. Cleofilas may recall her father's words at her wedding ceremony: "*I am your father. I will never abandon you*" (43).

She will be under her father's power again. It means that her patronizer switches from an egoistic husband to an authoritative father. Cisneros indicates ironically that Cleofilas's position remains subordinate even she awakens herself.

We might also examine how the representation of home is at work in Cisneros's stories in contrast to the notion of borderlands. In her stories, home as a place for solidarity and affection seems to exist nowhere; home turns into a place of betrayal. In "Woman Hollering Creek," the home for Cleofilas is not sweet any more. It smells of degeneration because of her husband's betrayal. In "Never Marry a Mexican," Cisneros depicts a woman who leaves a gummy bear in the room of her lover's wife as an evidence of adultery. Both examples show man's carelessness and woman's deliberateness. Thus man's carelessness and woman's deliberateness make home a place of betrayal. Women are forced to experience a disillusionment at their home. Then, where do we situate a place of reliance and affection? A sense of loss hovers over Cisneros's stories in shaping a fluctuating identity between masculine discourse and female discourse as well as Mexican culture and American culture. The meaning of home in identity construction may turn us to some psychological approach. However, I want to touch on the issue of the location of identity in a geographical sense; the location of domestic space and dominant discourse which affect our state of being in positioning our identity.

Home should be the place where we are brought up and nurtured. In the United States, in particular, the movement of making homeland keeps going because the United States is a nation of immigrants. The problem of affiliation and affinity, in due course, emerges in the rhetorical borderland in which a crush of regionalism and collision of many cultures happen. Etienne Balibar presents an interesting argument about the construction of peoplehood.⁸ Balibar singles out the family and the school in the formation of the nation. The family is supposed to be "the anchoring point for the judicial, economic, educational and medical mediation of the state." However, migration and intermarriage bring up a problem of ethnicity in this situation and eventually produce a linguistic community inside the nation. Balibar's argument about the family suggests that the family is forced to handle official discourse as a juncture to the nation and that they confront the language problem.

Cisneros represents an opposite feeling toward a linguistic community. As Jean Wyatt argues, Cisneros sees the world in a double vision. In "Bien Pretty," Lupe feels an affinity with Spanish: "that language murmured by grandmothers, those words that smelled like your house, like flour tortillas, and the inside of your daddy's hat" (153). Therefore she has an uneasy feeling toward English: "*That* language. . . . English crunchy as apples, resilient and stiff as sailcloth" (153). Eventually Lupe shows her opposing feeling toward official language: "*Urracas*. Grackles. *Urracas*. Different ways of looking at the same bird. City calls them grackles, but I prefer *urracas*. That roll of the *r* making all the difference" (164). Cisneros exercises double consciousness which makes her uneasy with and resistant to both cultures.

The space in which Cisneros sees the world in a double vision can be defined as a borderland. As the borderland has a geographical connotation, we can find a certain location of a borderland consciousness. The location of the borderland consciousness might be put in the home. Although it sounds contradictory, the unrest with the borderland reflects the dynamic position of home between official discourse and private life. As the home is a place of betrayal, the borderland consciousness awakens Cisneros to a gap between official discourse and private feeling. Therefore, the process of examining the location of the home and the borderland consciousness reveals Cisneros's dislocated feeling. Cisneros's characters cannot fit themselves into the home and they become eventually aware of their segregated situation. Her double vision as the borderland consciousness forces her to perceive the ambivalent feeling toward dominant discourses, such as patriarchal society and official language. The borderland consciousness can be interpreted in terms of gender and culture in Cisneros's stories. Her borderland consciousness cannot limit itself to the sphere of Mexican and American cultures. Thus, we notice that we also live in a borderland of home in the world of transnational communications and global relations. That is to say, we are living in a borderland community. Ramon Saldivar examines Chicano narrative as the possibility of "the dialectic of difference." As he insists on the dynamics of particular culture, cultural differences dialectically can provide the exit for communities in which we share feelings.⁹ The conflation of the home and the borderland, as we see in Cisneros's stories, shows contradictory feelings desiring solidity on the one hand and oscillation on the other hand in searching out identity. The borderland consciousness makes a turning point in thinking American identity. Most significantly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the notion of the borderland will provide insight into the formation of the modern self.

NOTES

All parenthetical citations from Sandra Cisneros come from *Women Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

- ¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).
- ² Ramon Saldivar explicates the historical context of the Southwest and the West in terms of borderland. As a rhetorical approach, Sacvan Bercovitch defines the border as the outskirts of the advancing kingdom of God. Ramon Saldivar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*, (The University of Wisconsin Press) and Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Rites of Assets: Rhetoric, Ritual, and the Ideology of American Consensus," in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture*, ed. Sam Girgus, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981).
- ³ Homi, Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- ⁴ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974).

- ⁵ According to Paul Gilroy, representation of ethnicity is deeply embedded in aesthetic judgment. He argues that “there is a plea of ‘race’ beauty, ethnicity, and culture have contributed to the critical thinking that eventually gives rise to cultural studies. . . Complex cultural difference comes to be valued rather than single biological hierarchy.” Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (New York: Verso, 1993). In this book Gilroy delves into Du Bois’s dissatisfaction with American modernity and offers the possibility of cultural integrity, or hybridity, intermixture in his term, through the idea of Du Bois. Gilroy’s tone is, as he confesses, “to transcend both the structure of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity.” However, as we notice, it sounds as essentialist as Anzaldua does.
- ⁶ Wyatt examines the iconography of Cisneros’s stories in terms of negotiation of gender and cultures. Wyatt situates the Mexican myth and Anzaldua’s borderland consciousness in her polemics. La Malinche represents the ambivalence of femininity: on the one hand, it empowers the adaptation of masculine discourse by female characters and on the other hand, it causes the feeling of guilty. Wyatt takes female identity construction as ongoing. Therefore a female character suffers the sense of a violator as a transient feeling. Jean Wyatt, “On Not Being La Malinche: Border Negotiations of Gender in Sandra Cisneros’s ‘Never Marry a Mexican’ and ‘Woman Hollering Creek,’” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 14 (1995): 243-271.
- ⁷ I want to refer to Chatterjee’s argument in examining a sense of betrayal in order to connect the problem of woman and nation. When Chatterjee explicates the woman’s question, he maneuvers a logic of betrayal as the polemics in positioning the women in the process of nation-making. The negotiation which aims to liberate from the colonial state causes many accounts or recounts of a story of betrayal among people who expect liberation, because in many ways individuals who try to serve public discourse turn into sacrificial victims. A story of betrayal is a private discourse against public narration which establishes such sacrifices. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- ⁸ Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, trans. by Chris Turner, (New York: Verso, 1991).
- ⁹ Saldívar argues that “this narrative for demystifying the relations between minority cultures and the dominant cultures is the process I term ‘the dialectics of difference’ of Chicano literature. In the course of my discussion, I will show how the dialectical form of narratives by Chicano men and women is an authentic way of grappling with a reality that seems always to transcend representation, a reality into which the subject of the narrative’s action seeks to enter, all the while learning the lesson of its own ideological closure, and of history’s resistance to the symbolic structures in which subjectivity formed. For Chicano narrative, *history* is the subtext that we must recover because history itself is the subject of its discourse. History cannot be conceived as the mere ‘background’ or ‘context’ for this literature; rather history turns out to be the decisive determinant of the form and content of the literature” (5).