CHANGING THE BACKDROP: PORTRAITURE IN SANDRA CISNEROS' *NEVER MARRY A MEXICAN*

The story *Never Marry a Mexican* is at the center of Sandra Cisneros' volume of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek*, both in order of its appearance and in the degree of social awareness of its main character, Clemencia. The volume, published in 1992, develops the interconnecting themes of community and emancipation as it explores different facets of the Chicana experience. The awareness of the women in the stories of this collection varies from a simple epiphany concerning sexual oppression to resignation and foiled escape. In every case, however, the character attains some understanding of her own position in a world which denies her the opportunity to be central to her own existence. Cisneros suggests through the experience of the Clemencia that the attempt by the Chicana to extricate her identity from the fabric of her society results in the loss of identity altogether.[1] To restore wholeness to the identity of Clemencia, Cisneros uses a motif of metamorphosis that proposes a modification of the image of the Chicana on three levels: the historical, the personal, and the symbolic. The result of such modification is the creation of a social landscape in which the Chicana is the center and subject of the portraiture. The metamorphosis motif used by Cisneros suggests a social evolution through which the individual is not merely reborn but is recreated. By suggesting a different social landscape for her character, Cisneros proposes that the Chicana must look at herself from a perspective not made available to her in Western culture in order to discover the creature that she is. By adjusting to that perspective, she is reborn in her view of herself.

In *Never Marry a Mexican*, Clemencia, the narrator, attempts to "draw" herself to discover her identity through the examination of her past. Her experiences, revealed in retrospect, initially expose the narrator's sense of dissolution, a state from which she unconsciously begins to recreate herself. The title of the story, *Never Marry a Mexican*, immediately establishes the conflict of race/culture that is central to the Clemencia's loss of identity. The first of the narrator's account further identifies her situation, that of a third-generation

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[1] Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano explains that the problem of individuation for Chicana women is compounded by their social as well as their sexual definition. As a critic of Chicana literature, she explains the interconnected factors that contribute to the conflicts found in Chicana literature: "Perhaps the most important principle of Chicana feminist criticism is the realization that the Chicana's experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture. Her task is to show how in works by Chicanas, elements of gender, race, culture, and class coalesce" (140). Perhaps Yarbro-Bejarano's statement may be generalized as indicative of the difficulty that Chicanas, whether they be critics, writers, readers, or even illiterate sisters, have in recognizing some image of themselves apart from the oppressive crossgrains of culture that make up their existence.

Mexican American who is striving to assimilate into the majority culture. The spousal choices of both the narrator and her mother indicate that such assimilation is possible for a woman through marriage into the majority class and culture. Clemencia's mother had been born of immigrant Mexican parents who had crossed the United States border looking for work. She goes back to her "roots" in choosing a husband from an upper-class Mexican heritage, a choice that would have been socially advantageous in Mexico. As a Mexican American, however, she comes to feel that she has married "down" because her husband is not an American and knows practically no English.

As a young man, Clemencia's father had run away from the university because he had disgraced his family. He is a good deal older than Clemencia's mother. Because she comes from a family of a lower social class than his own, he feels that he has married "down" as well: "But what could be more rediculous than a Mexican girl who couldn't even speak Spanish, who didn't know enough to set a separate plate for each course at dinner, nor how to fold cloth napkins, nor how to set the silverware" (69).[2] In her desire for social identity, Clemencia adores her father for his elegant, gentile manner. His wife, however, despises these same traits, accusing him of putting on airs. Clemencia says: " ... a *fanfarrón*. That's what my mother thought... . A big show-off, she'd say years later" (70). Though Clemencia sees her father's style as "*calidad*," she likewise admires the generosity and dignity of her maternal grandfather, whose simple, peasant ways embarrassed his daughter and were scorned by her husband.

Clemencia understands that her father or her mother would have married "up," however, if either had married a EuroAmerican, no matter how poor. Late in their marriage, the narrator's mother begins an affair with a white man, whom she later marries. In recognition of her own social failure, she tells her daughter, "Never marry a Mexican." In terms of social assimilation, the admonition to "never marry a Mexican" is advice that promotes social mobility. The movement of both the narrator and her mother through a choice of mate represents attempts at power brokering. The narrator's mother had married out of the peasant class into the elite class of Mexican society. However, the social advantages of that marriage were lost to the mother when her husband immigrated to the United States, where his social class/connections without money meant nothing. Clemencia is born of a mother who believes that she is socially superior to her husband because she is "American" and a father who feels he is superior to her mother socially because of his elitist, old-world upbringing. The cancellation of the standards of these two social systems by one another obliterates the narrator's sense of inherited class identification.

The next step in the mother's attempt at social assimilation is the rejection

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[2] All citations from the story are accompanied by page references from the collection *Woman Hollering Creek* published by Vintage Books, New York, 1991.

of her Mexican husband and the acquisition of an EuroAmerican lover/husband from the blue collar class. The narrator extends her mother's attempt at social assimilation with her choice of a lover who, by the description of his home and family life, is presumed to be a member of the U. S. upper middle class. This movement in lovers from the ranks of the working class minority to the middle class majority is equivalent to her mother's move in her marriages from peasant class Mexican to lower class white. But in this attempt to move up the social ladder, the narrator finds a glass ceiling in her mobility because of her race. Her lover remains married to his EuroAmerican wife, and keeps his lover, Clemencia, in the shadows of his social existence. Clemencia finds, then, that she has neither a historical heritage nor can she acquire one. She is denied social acceptance above that of the working class on the basis of her (assumed) immigrant status while she is in exile from the culture which would otherwise recognize her elite heritage.

Within the ambiance of the cultural conflict at work in the story, "Never Marry a Mexican" is an admonition to the narrator against an attempt to retain her heritage. Following her mother's example, she takes an EuroAmerican lover, and following her admiration for her father, he is from the upper middle class. Her attempt to live according to the conflicting values of her parents' class and culture, each one of which cancel the other out, leaves her with no means for identification of class or culture for herself. She has rejected her identification as Hispanic through taking her mother's advice to "never marry a Mexican," but the EuroAmerican she takes as a lover does not claim her over his EuroAmerican wife. She neither claims herself as Mexican by these associations, nor is she "claimed" as EuroAmerican. Her unfruitful attempt at assimilation has precluded any cultural identifications (definitions) at all. A sign of resignation to her "nothingness" comes when she accepts her secondary status by encouraging her lover to father a child by his wife.

Clemencia not only lacks identification by culture, she likewise can find no identification through class. An indication of her inability to form an identification for herself in her social surroundings is her wandering between her old neighborhood and her work environment. She has endeavored to attain a high status of education in spite of her working class roots, but continues to live in the *barrio*. In spite of her education and her achievement as an artist, she earns a meager living as a sometimes translator/ sometimes substitute teacher. Though members of the cultured class include her in their gatherings as accomplished artist, they do not support her art. That she cannot fully identify with either group is obvious from her statement:

> I'm amphibious. I'm a person who doesn't belong to any class. The rich like to have me around because they envy my creativity; they know they can't buy *that*. The poor don't mind if I live in their neighborhood because they know I'm poor like they are, even if my education and the way I dress keeps us worlds apart. I don't belong to any

> class. Not to the poor, whose neighborhood I share. Not to the rich who come to my exhibitions. Not to the middle class from which my sister Ximena and I fled. (71-72)

As in her recalcitrant attitude toward marriage ("I'll *never* marry" is her response to her mother's advice), Clemencia's response to this exclusion shows a bravado that hides her feelings of alienation. Though she attempts to delude herself at the first of this description by calling herself "amphibious," implying that she has the ability to cross class lines, by the end of the passage she has exposed an open wound. Her education, professional status, and lifestyle alienate her from others of her race, while the same attributes are given only a token nod by the majority culture.

The invisibility that the narrator suffers because of her ethnicity is compounded by the silence and absence that her gender role dictates. It is significant to the gender factor found in the story that Cisneros casts the narrator's "telling" as a stream-of-consciousness narrative. It is clear from the substance of Clemencia's musings that, though her actions mimic her thoughts, these thoughts have neither been spoken aloud nor demonstrated to the principal actors in her life. At her father's deathbed, at the sight of his treatment, she remembers:

> ... and I wanted to yell, Stop, you stop that, he's my daddy. Goddamn you. Make him live. Daddy, don't. Not yet, not yet, not yet. And how I couldn't hold myself up, I couldn't hold myself up. Like if they'd beaten me, or pulled my insides out through my nostrils, like if they'd stuffed me with cinnamon and cloves, and I just stood there dry-eyed ... (74)

Her emotions are hidden by her outward appearance because the open expression of her emotions would be considered "a scene" in the cold, sterile world of the American hospital. Her recalcitrance forbids her to show the "weakness" attributed to such displays of "unreasonable" behavior. The image of what such silence has done to her is delivered in the passage above. In the scene of mummification, her "gut' feelings are embalmed with the "cinnamon and cloves" of decorous public behavior. Clemencia equates this deceptive decorum with the demands of the majority culture when she describes the polite way that her lover's EuroAmerican wife answers her call in the middle of the night, and then obediently hands the phone to her husband when he's asked for. Clemencia says of the incident, "No Mexican woman would react like that. Excuse me, honey. It cracked me up" (77). This revelation is given only ruminate space, however; Clemencia would never express it to her lover with whom she is likewise silent. Addressing her lover in her thoughts, she says: "I keep it to myself like I do all the thoughts I think of you... ," and, as if with perspicacity, "With you I'm useless with words. As if somehow I had to learn to speak all over again, as if the words I needed haven't been invented yet" (78). Clemencia, as the narrator, is silenced even to herself, as an actress in

silent film. Through the narration of her thoughts and memoirs, she is a mimic who expresses her unspeakable feelings in the exaggerated actions, a sort of hysteria, of her revelation.[3] It is only through these actions and ruminations that the reader comes to know the conflicts and frustrations in her life.

According to Luce Irigaray's Feminist explanation of the Oedipal complex, women are relegated to silence and absence because, ironically, they are at the center of the family dance. All other members of the family are defined by their relationship with the mother, but she herself is left undefined. Lucia Guerra expands on the Marxist aspect of women's absence when she explains: "*... ella es poseedora de un cuerpo hecho objeto del Deseo, bajo las imposiciones patriarcales que protegen la propiedad legítima sobre los hijos, le está prohibido ser Sujeto de ese Deseo bajo la mirada plácida del modelo segrado de la Virgen María —figura asexuada por excelencia.*"[4] Clemencia's mother has been the victim of such obliteration in both a cultural sense, through her first marriage with a Mexican, as well as in the described Oedipal sense. Guerra Cunningham explains this obliteration of the feminine in Lacanian terms, referring to women's identity as a case of "*No ser/Ser/Deber ser*":

> *La mujer como individuo que en su rol primario de madre ha permanecido en el espacio marginal de la Cultura irónicamente es también la matriz de prolíferas construcciones culturales en su calidad de Otro. Un Otro creado por el Sujeto masculino como necesidad imperiosa para una economía que ideológicamente se sustenta a partir de lo Mismo. Poniendo de la manera irreverente los mechanismos del falologocentrismo, se podría afirmar que la materialidad e inmanencia atribuidas a la mujer responden a las estrategias de un poder masculino que necesita ubicar en su tablero las fichas del No-Ser para imponer el Ser... .*[5]

Such a system renders any attempt at sustained elevation as hopeless since power in the Patriarchy is passed down through the sons. While Clemencia and her sister long for the security of the house of their own father's house, they have been disinherited through their mother's second marriage:

> Ximena would say, Clemencia, maybe we should go home. And I'd say, Shit! Because she knew as well as I did there was no home to go to. Not with that man she'd married. After Daddy died, it was like we didn't matter... . My half brothers living in that house that should've been ours, me and Ximena's. (73)

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[3] Catherine Clement (is the resemblance of her name and Cisneros' narrator's a mere coincidence?), in her long essay "Sorceress and Hysteric," (*The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing. *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 24. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1986.) explains hysteria as the language of the repressed feminine. It is perhaps for this reason that Clemencia, as she is reborn, says: "So. What do you think? Are you convinced now I'm as crazy as a tulip or a taxi? As vagrant as a cloud?" (83).

[4] Lucia Guerra Cunningham, "La producción literaria de la mujer Latinoamericana," in *Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Feminist Literary Criticism*, Hernán Vidal, ed. *Literature and Human Rights No. 4*. Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1989; p. 141.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

The lack established through the *No ser/Ser/Deber ser* status of the female insures that property and power can be reinvested into the patriarchal line even in the event of the female inheritance of it. It is an insurance against the loss of Patriarchal power. The same principle of operation is true for the maintenance of majority power. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano explains: " ... the Chicana's experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture."[6] As exemplified in the mother's marriage to a EuroAmerican, marginalization by gender and race/class doubly insures that power is reinvested in the majority culture as well.

It is through marriage and motherhood that a woman submits to extraction from the field as a subject. The hospital scene mirrors the assimilation that the Mexican American woman is expected to make:

> And I remember the doctor scraping the phlegm out of my father's mouth with a white washcloth, and my daddy gagging. ... I just stood there dry-eyed next to Ximena and my mother, Ximena between us because I wouldn't let her stand next to me. Everyone repeating over and over the Ave Marías and Padre Nuestros. The priest sprinkling holy water, *mundo sin fin, amén*. (74)

As the priest administers Last Holy Rites to Clemencia's Mexican father, she is separated from him by the doctor who, scraping phlegm from the father's mouth, is emblematic of the mechanics of displacement that take place in exile. The use of the *white* washcloth to clear the contents of her father's mouth represents the evacuation of their culture from them, the tenets of which is embodied in language that comes from the mouth. When Clemencia says, "But that's —water under the damn," expresses the cancellation of her identity as it is expressed through idiom: "I can't even get the sayings right even though I was born in this country. We didn't say shit like that in our house" (73). In the order of their departure from traditional roles of womanhood, strongly revered in Hispanic culture, Clemencia, her sister, and her mother stand to the side witnessing the scene of the symbolic eradication of their Mexican heritage as represented by the dying figure of the father. Clemencia's sister, Ximena, stands between Clemencia's recalcitrance to the traditional feminine roles and the cultural and genderbased opportunism that their mother practices. The "X" that begins Ximena's name hardly disguises its implied association with "hymen."[7]

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[6] Yvonne Yarbro-Bajarano, "Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective," *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*, María Herrera Sobek and Helena María Viramontes, eds. Houston: Arte Público, 1988; p. 140.

[7] The use of the "X" in place of a "J" in Ximena's name may signal the use of the name as a sort of shibboleth by the author. Clemencia states that she is a "translator" and the message of the story seems to indicate that the story itself is a shibboleth, intended to convey meaning to the Mexican American and/or Feminist reader that may not be readily apparent to the reader who does not understand, for example, the allusion to "La Malinche" as is suggested in the title and by Clemencia's relationship with Drew.

Her plight is that of many women caught in the flux of changing family values. Ximena is even more victim of her gender than her mother because she is trapped in the *barrio*, her husband having deserted her and their children. She is trapped in poverty because of her motherhood in an economic system that promotes women's dependency. Such is the victimization that Clemencia seeks to escape in her declaration, "I'll *never* marry. Not any man. I've known men too intimately" (68). In that declaration, she expresses a polemic view opposite to the opportunistic role into which Patriarchy forces women.

A movement by Mexican American women through a spectrum of various cultural and class identities is given image by Cisneros in the scene of Clemencia's father's Final Rites as well. In the image of the three women, one may see the patriarchal order of power as well as the dissipation of cultural inheritance. Both the financial and the cultural identity is visited upon the mother, who will supplicate to a male of the EuroAmerican majority class. Ximena, second in line, loses her father's legacy, by her mother's acts, to the majority culture. She, however, inherits her mother's traditional feminine role, and is enslaved in the developing gap between the two cultural systems. Clemencia, anguished over the loss of her father, in whom she identifies a cultural and social legacy, rebels against her mother, whom she sees as a traitor. The words that they all repeat after the priest reflect the order of the system under which women are disinherited as it identifies the church as perpetrators of the system. "Ave Maria" ("Hail Mary") reflects the token respect given to motherhood, praise that damns the feminine through the disguise and promotion of her *No ser/Ser/Deber ser* status. Ownership and control, however, is acknowledged in the Padre Nuestros ("Our Father"), the father's role in the image of the Patriarchal Godhead. Cisnero's choice to leave the "Ave Maria" in Latin, while using the Spanish translation of "Pater Noster," accentuates the ideas of silence and control respectively through linguistic identification by the reader. It simultaneously re-emphasizes Clemencia's anguish at the loss of the father with whom she wishes to identify.

In the erasure of her identification as a wife and a "Mexican," Clemencia has excluded any identification she might otherwise hold of herself through the cancellation of one culture by another and one class by another. Her musing, as exposed through the text of the narrative, is an attempt to find a definition for herself. Consciously, she brings herself only to nothingness, the point where she must deny community of any class, culture, or gender identification. Ironically, while the narrator's conscious attempt to define herself reveals her dissolution, the reflexive nature of the narrative reveals that the narrator, who is an artist, is attempting to "draw" an identity for herself. An early indication of this reflexive parallel to the surface narrative is in the narrator's revelation of her affair with her art teacher. In Clemencia's mother's admonition to her daughter, "never marry a Mexican," she has instructed her daughter to define herself in the EuroAmerican field by being identified with/by a EuroAmerican

husband. It is appropriate to the story that Clemencia's lover's name is "Drew." Through him, Clemencia attempts to "draw" herself according to the standards of the middle-class, EuroAmerican majority culture. However, as her "drawing" teacher, Drew forces her to draw herself as La Malinche, a Mexican symbol of female betrayal.[8] Referring to their early relationship, Clemencia says: "Drew, remember when you used to call me your Malinalli? It was a joke, a private game between us because you looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours. My skin dark against yours. Beautiful, you said. You said I was beautiful, and when you said it, Drew, I was" (74). During their affair, Drew taught her to draw herself by his standards, which are EuroAmerican, upper-class, and male. Ironically, those standards echo the words of Clemencia's mother captured in the title of the story. Clemencia mocks his words at his later rejection of her: "Hadn't I understood ... responsibilities. Besides, he could never marry me. You didn't think...? Never marry a Mexican. Never marry a Mexican ... No, of course not. I see. I see" (80). Like Cortés' view of Malinalli (*La Malinche's* Indian name), Drew's picture of Clemencia places her second to his "proper" wife, Megan, "a red-headed Barbie doll in a fur coat" (243). Like *La Malinche*, Clemencia is cast aside, without apology, when Drew decides to return to his own society, which dictates his "responsibilities." As mentioned above, Clemencia's encouragement of Drew to return to his wife in order to father a child by her is an indication that Clemencia, too, has come to consciously identify herself as a Malinche, as someone not having enough value in Drew's culture to be his legal consort or bear his heirs.

It is important at this point to remember that Clemencia elaborates on the fact she does not make her living by her art because, although the majority culture tokenize their appreciation for it by showing her off at parties, they do not buy it. She says: "People say, 'A painter? How nice,' and want to invite me to their parties, have me decorate the lawn like an exotic orchid for hire.

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[8] La Malinche was the Indian slave woman presented to Cortés as a gift of friendship by the Aztec leader. She became instrumental in the negotiations between Cortés and various Indian tribes. These negotiations eventually led to the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. For this reason, La Malinche has become a symbol of betrayal in Mexican consciousness. Sandra Messinger Cypess, in her *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1991), says: "Although [La Malinche's] voice may have been silenced, her presence and functions are documented in the chronicles. For that reason she may be considered the first woman of Mexican Literature, just as she is considered the first mother of the Mexican nation and the Mexican Eve, symbol of national betrayal (2). Cypess' contention that La Malinche is "the first mother of Mexican nationality" is based on Alonso Léon de Garay's *Una aproximación a la psicología del mexicano*. Cypess characterizes La Malinche's image as representing the Desireable Whore/Terrible Mother archetype in the modern Mexican consciousness by saying: "La Malinche ... embodies both negative national identity and sexuality in its most irrational form, a sexuality without regard to moral laws or cultural values. ... one who conforms to her paradigm is labeled *malinchista*, the individual who sells out to the foreigner, who devalues national identity in favor of imported benefits" (7). Cypess records Malinal, Malintzin, Malinche, or Doña Marina as alternative versions of the name, La Malinche (2).

But do they buy my art?" (71). Instead, Clemencia earns a meager living as a substitute teacher and a translator. Her personal "marketability" as a woman reflects this same tokenism in Drew's attitude toward her as others do toward her art. She tells Drew's son:

> Before you were born. When you were a moth inside your mother's heart, I was your father's student, yes, just like you're mine now. And your father painted and painted me, because he said, I was his *doradita*, all golden and sunbaked, and that's what kind of woman he likes best, the ones brown as riversand, yes. And he took me under his wing and in his bed, this man, this teacher, your father. I was honored that he'd done me the favor. I was that young. (76)

Drew accepts her as an aesthetic object for his enjoyment and profit, but he is not willing to risk anything to possess her—his social status, his home, his income, nothing. This passage and many others reflect, however, that Clemencia's game by which she aims to acquire identity—that is, "paint" herself into North American culture, is by substitution and, finally, translation. Not having a husband of her own, she "borrows" other women's husbands, and substitutes as a wife and, in an Oedipal sense, as a mother. She says, contemptuously: "Borrowed. That's how I've had my men" (69). Addressing Drew in her thoughts, she says:

> ... Your son. ... Did you tell him, while his mother lay on his back laboring his birth, I lay in his mother's bed making love to you. ... And that's not the last time I've slept with a man the night his wife is birthing a baby. ... Why do I do that? It's always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that, without their knowing it. To know I've had their husbands when they were anchored in blue hospital rooms, their guts yanked inside out, the baby suckling their breasts while their husband suckled mine. (74-77)

This chain of passages relates the history of Clemencia's substitution of herself for the wives of her EuroAmerican lovers. She substitutes their experience for hers as well. Her image of "their guts yanked inside out" parallels the image she gives of herself ("pulled my insides out through my nostrils") as she sees her father, the symbol of her Hispanic heritage, dying. She translates their mothers, their wives, the mothers of their children, into herself. By the Oedipal substitution of the son for the father, she also translates history through this substitution, making the "*doradita* ...brown as the river sand," the propagator of the race, and the "proper" wife in North American culture.

This substitution on the personal level of the story is accomplished over the approximately twenty-year span that Clemencia's retrospective narration encompasses. Agreeing to end their affair, Clemencia spends a final weekend at Drew's house while his wife is away. During this visit, Clemencia "seeds" Megan's private belongings with Gummy Bears, protoplasmic-looking candies in the shape of a toy. Clemencia recounts:

> I went over to where I'd left my backpack, and took out a bag of gummy bears I'd bought. And while [Drew] was banging pots, I went around the house and left a trail of them in places I was sure *she* would find them. One in her Lucite makeup organizer. One stuffed in each bottle of nail polish. I untwisted the expensive lipsticks to their full length and smushed a bear on top before recapping them. I even put a gummy bear in her diaphragm case in the very center of that luminescent rubber moon. (81)

This "seeding" ends with the suggested interference of some "Mexican voodoo," which sets an "abracadabra" on the act, a winding up of the spell she has cast. This activity corresponds to Clemencia's seeming generosity in persuading Drew to have a child with his wife. She substitutes her "protoplasm" for the "*calidad*' possessions of Draw's wife, symbolically taking Megan's place in Drew's home.

By extending the La Malinche-Cortés relationship as the metaphor for the narrator's identification of herself, the reader may understand that, symbolically, "the boy" becomes the child that Malinche bore to Cortés, making Malinche known as the mother of the Mexican "race," the *mestizo*.[9] "The boy" whom Clemencia claims as her own son, is the result of her relinquishment of the affair with Drew. According to the "voodoo" Clemencia performed, she is "the boy's" mother by substitution, and now "mothers" him because she is his confidant and his drawing teacher, in the same way as Drew, his father, was hers. He is also a "plant" in Drew's and Megan's household, like the gummy bears. The *mestizo*, as a cross between the European and the Indian, is a true "American," in the modern sense of the word, as the product of a society that claims to value its "melting pot" origins. In a symbolic reversal of La Malinche-Cortés episode, Clemencia has seduced Drew so that he produces the child of their relationship. Clemencia therefore reverses the direction of "Americanization." Purification of the race has taken a turn from mixing white blood in the

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[9] As a sort of Mexican "Eve," one possible redeeming act on La Malinche's part was giving birth to Cortés' son. Cypess (*La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth.* Austin: U of Texas P, 1991) translates Rosario Castellano's remark on the ambivalence of this event in the Mexican consciousness as: "Some call her a traitor, others consider her the foundress of our nationality, according to whatever perspective they choose to judge her from" (7). This son, Martín Cortés, represents the mixture of the European and Indian races that took place through the conquest. (It should be noted, however, that this "representation" may not be not historically based. Dr. Wendell Aycock of Texas Tech University has recently informed me that the first *mestizo* was born after a Spaniard was left in the Yucatan. He later greeted Cortés with his family, his firstborn apparently being the first *mestizo*.) In respect to her status as the consort of the "First" conquistador, i.e., Cortés, and the mother of his son, Cypess calls La Malinche a "root paradigm" and states of her significance to Mexican culture: "In popular mythology La Malinche serves as a synecdoche for all Indian women who lament the fate of their progeny born to the Spanish conquistadors" (7). La Malinche's treatment by Cortés is likewise paradigmatic as it relates to the concept of machismo. Cypess states: "The conquest was a crucial event in the formation of male-female relations. Succinctly described by Elu de Lañero, the traditional image influencing male-female relationships is derived from Cortés being served by La Malinche. In the way a Mexican man enjoys dominating a woman, wants service from her, and expects to impose his will and body on her and then dispose of her, he repeats the pattern Cortés established with La Malinche" (8).

native, to mixing native blood with the white. Instead of Europeanizing the Indian, Clemencia begins an Indianization of the European, thereby beginning a trend, at least symbolically, and probably unconsciously, to legitimize her own culture as acceptable, if not predominate, in the New World. Within this perspective, she paints the American according to her standard. Speaking of Drew, she says:

> You're nothing without me. I made you from spit and red dust. And I can snuff you between my finger and thumb if I want to. Blow you to kingdom come. You're just a smudge of paint I chose to birth on canvas. ... I paint and repaint you as I see fit, even now. ... Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is? (75)

In the act of "seeding" herself into Drew's line, she accomplishes identity through an adjustment to her own terms of acculturalization, rather than attempting, as her mother has directed her, to adjust herself to the dominant culture's unreachable conditions for assimilation.

The next step in Clemencia's substitution is the translation of the field of her portrait, which is the cultural landscape in which the *mestizo* appears. Bernal Díaz records that upon the arrival of Doña Catalina Xuárez, Cortés' European wife, Cortés arranged a marriage between Malinche and one of his own men.[10] By this act, he disowned his own child by Malinche by legitimizing his first marriage. In essence, this act took place on a personal level, but, as synecdoche, it constitutes the basis for the European usurpation of Mexican rule. To translate this event into the re-creation of herself, Clemencia makes the final substitution at both a personal and a symbolic level. She recounts that Drew had brought her a set of nesting "babushka" dolls from Russia and so supposes that the set she finds on the desk during her Gummy Bear excursion must have been Drew's identical gift to Megan. She says:

> I did just what I did, uncapped the doll inside a doll inside a doll, until I got to the very center, the tiniest baby inside all the others, and this I replaced with a gummy bear. And then I put the dolls back just like I'd found them, one inside the other, inside the other. Except for the baby, which I put inside my pocket. (81-82)

The identical gifts from Drew, then, indicates that he gives equal value to both women on a personal level. It is only through the original usurpation that one type of woman has come to be preferred by the majority culture over the other. The Russian babushka dolls are egg-shaped and nesting, so that the opening of one "gives birth" to the previous generation. The innermost doll is called "the grandmother" of the set. As such, the set represents generations of women. By

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[10] Sandra Messinger Cypess in her *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth,* Austin: U of Texas P, 1991; p. 38.

uncapping the dolls, Clemencia "unhatches" the ideal of American womanhood represented by Megan, the "type" of woman made legitimate as a wife by Cortés' sanction of his first wife as legitimate. The symbolic substitution that Clemencia makes effects a reversal of the social and cultural metamorphosis that Europeanized the American culture. Clemencia begins the cultural evolution anew, preparing the rebirth of different ideal, by "planting" her own heritage, represented by the gummy bear, in place of the innermost doll. In doing so, Clemencia eliminates the European pride in "*sangre puro*" from the history of American culture, and translates it to a value for the mixed inheritance of her own kind, the *mestizo*. The substitution is made complete, and her antagonism vindicated, in the "voodoo" she performs next:

> On the way home, on the bridge over the *arroyo* on Guadelupe street, I stopped the car, switched on the emergency blinkers, got out, and dropped the wooden toy into the muddy creek where winos piss and rats swim. The Barbie doll's toy stewing in that muck. It gave me a feeling like nothing before or since. (82)

Clemencia casts Megan's doll, representative of the future generations descended from European beginnings, into the muck. By doing so, she supplants generations of her own ancestors. Now it is the Europeans who "stew" in oppression that the *mestizo* has suffered as the object of social discrimination. With her own "ancestor" in the sanctified position of the legitimized mother, Clemencia, then, sleeps "like the dead" in anticipation of her own rebirth many generations later. Because it is she, her "type," in the innermost egg, and it is also she that will be reborn, the sleep is like that of a creature inside a cocoon. The passing of the generations between the supplanting and her rebirth in a different form is a metamorphosis, the stages of which are represented by the nesting "eggs" into which Clemencia has planted her form. The new creature, a Chicana, will emerge into an America where the mestizo is the dominant culture, and she will acquire the legacy of cultural and social prestige.

It is at the end of this "sleep" that Clemencia's substitution brings about a "translation" of her existence. Clemencia waits patiently for her rebirth until she can substitute Drew's son, now a teenager, for Drew himself as her lover. Clemencia's affair with the boy, an act through which she consciously seeks revenge on her lover for his rejection of her, symbolically constitutes incest in compliance with the Oedipal model. It is through the reversal of this model that Clemencia effects the means for rebirth. Freud's model is phallocentric, where the male seeks to recreate himself in his son. In pursuit of that end, he dominates a woman who is a substitute for his mother. In Cisneros' story, where the protagonist seeks to escape both social and gender-based oppression, the author substitutes a matricentric model, thereby reversing the gender-based dynamics of oppression. Clemencia, in Cisnero's revelation, becomes the Jocasta of the Oedipal model, who bears the daughters of her own son. In Clemencia's case, however, any offspring would be that of matriarchal domi-

nance. By having "drawn" herself in as both his ancestor and his mother, Clemencia has "drawn" the son—Drew's son—as Cortés' son, a *mestizo.* Clemencia's statement, "Oh, love, there I've gone and done it" (83) is a reply to the admonition presented in the title of the story. According to the schema she has acted out through substitution and translation, Clemencia finds that she has, after all, married a Mexican. By taking the son into her bed in a symbolic replacement for his father, "Cortez," she gives birth to herself as an American who, because she is a *mestiza*, is dominant in a culture of her own propagation.

It is through substitution that Clemencia is able to restore the speech that she lost in exile—the loss that was given image when Clemencia watches the American doctor scrape the phlegm from her father's mouth. Before she realizes that she's "done it," (words that facetiously suggest both remorse and success), Clemencia bemoans her ephemeral existence:

> Sometimes the sky is so big and I feel so little at night. That's the problem with being a cloud. The sky is so terribly big. Why is it worse at night, when I have such an urge to communicate and no language with which to form the words? Only colors. Pictures. And you know what I have to say isn't always pleasant. (83)

After the announcement of her disobedience, however, Clemencia discovers the new world she has created. She has transformed the world that she lives in by substituting new pictures for old ones. She substitutes colors, forms, and perspectives, but she always changes the picture to give clemency—thus her name—to herself. In the former picture she had of herself—that which American society gave her—she was always La Malinche, a victim of elitism at all levels. In the new picture she has created for herself, however, she is a defined and central figure, and thus can afford to be charitable, rather than recalcitrant, in her outlook:

> 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 alright, honey. There, there, there. (83)

In the scheme of her re-birth, Clemencia's tone of anger and revenge is translated to acceptance, and thus she is able to relinquish Drew to the life he has chosen for himself. She pictures him "going back to sleep with that wife beside you ..., oh" (83).

The narrative does not, however, indicate that Clemencia has a conscious conception of the means of this acceptance, which are the actions and feelings that she has recounted. Regardless of the character's lack of awareness of the allegorical nature of her actions, the story itself, in its reflexivity, serves as a canvas for the new world that the author is painting. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano explains what seems to be Cisnero's purpose in the "painting" that the story comprises:

> The love of Chicanas for themselves and each other is at the heart of Chicana writing, for without this love they could never make the courageous move to place Chicana subjectivity in the center of literary representation, or depict pivotal relationships among women past and present, or even obey the first audacious impulse to put pen to paper. Even as that act of necessity distances the Chicana writer from her oral tradition and not so literate sisters, the continuing commitment to the political situation of all Chicanas creates a community in which readers, critics and writers alike participate.[11]

Cisneros, by her story, presents a model for the metamorphosis and rebirth of the Chicana personae. It begins with a rejection of the cultural values that paint her as "La Malinche" and proceeds with a re-endowment of dignity to both the image of her past and of her present. She must see herself central to her own emancipation, recalcitrant to oppression, and true to her own heart, even when the way is unclear. By this narrative, Cisneros paints a landscape of the Chicana experience and asks her sisters to find in it a portrait of themselves.

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[11] *Op. Cit.*, Yarbro-Bajarano; p. 144.