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Unmasking Male Voices in *Woman Hollering Creek*: Contributions to Pedagogy and Masculinity Studies

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ABSTRACT

In teaching Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* to undergraduates, we have developed a sociocultural and historical framework, beginning with the theoretical work of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* and the concept of *transfrontera feminism*. With incidents of seduction and sexual abuse of women, spousal abuse, and patriarchal family structures, the collection of stories strongly indicates the oppressive representation of *machismo*. Scholars and teachers have drawn important critiques of Cisneros's work based on destructive sociocultural forces on women. However, in rereading the text with an intended focus on the representations of male characters, we have surmised that Cisneros structured the stories in the text to reveal that men are simultaneously affected by sociocultural pressures. The male characters in this story collection play an important role beyond the characterization as oppressors.

Cisneros's stories have helped us unmask important social forces that affect not only Chicana characters, but husbands, lovers, and even neglected fathers. Male characters in *Woman Hollering Creek* also have basic needs for food, shelter, love, and dignity, and they too suffer the consequences of politically charged borders. Furthermore, these masculinity effects may not often be acknowledged in teaching literature courses. The pain and struggle of male and female genders are aligned within this collection; there are several male characters who signify masculinity, and compassion, and beauty. Therefore, in revising our curricula, we intend to place some stories from *Woman Hollering Creek* and Rigoberto González's *Men without Bliss* (2008) in conversation with each other. We do not intend to privilege one writer against another, but encourage students to consider the contributions and limitations of each in terms of theme, characterization, plot, and literary technique. It

is our intention to teach students that Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* humanizes both men and women in their strength, frailty, and quest for love.

Keywords: Sandra Cisneros, Chicana Literature, *transfrontera feminism*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, Gloria Anzaldúa

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* has been taught in many high school and college classrooms as an example of a young, perceptive, and specifically *Latina* voice to diversify curriculum. Since that novel's publication in 1984 and its significant mass appeal, Cisneros has become a resounding voice for *feminismo popular*, transnational feminism, and *transfrontera* (identity) politics (Mullen, Ramirez-Dhoore, Wyatt), all of which contest oppressive agendas against women from Latin America and beyond the borders of the United States. For instance, Saldívar-Hull notes that the title story in *Woman Hollering Creek*, the short story collection Cisneros would publish in 1991, "changes the subject of dominant, patriarchal discourse and lets readers imagine how Chicana *transfrontera* feminism and Mexican *feminismo popular* can converge in other spaces and under other circumstances to produce socially nuanced global Chicana Mexicana coalitions" (251). Cisneros's contributions to Chicana feminism in literature cannot be overstated, especially in paving the way for writers, such as Julia Alvarez, Ana Castillo, Cristina García, Melinda Palacio, and Carla Trujillo; the adoption of Latino/a writers in secondary and post-secondary education; and the further rise of Latino/a and Chicano/a Studies Departments.

Because Cisneros's *Mango Street* had achieved popularity in educational circles during the early late 1980s, Latchaw adopted it over the last decade teaching her Latino/a unit for Ethnic Literature, a sophomore level course. On the advice of another faculty member, she later opted for the edgier *Woman Hollering Creek*. In the early 2000s, Guerra also adopted selected stories from this collection for his American Literature survey course. During one semester the two of us co-taught the book, combining our two classes for several sessions. In our approach we highlighted *transfrontera* feminism, noting that early reviews of the book were contradictory and polarized. One *Kirkus* review from March 1991 describes the book as stories of "growing up female in a culture where women are both strong and victimized [and] men are unfaithful" (*Kirkus Reviews).* The stories were viewed as either presenting strong piranha-like women, abusive men, or weak naïve victims. Latchaw and Guerra's collaboration over this period led us to discover how we could reconsider and complicate our initial approach, which had been informed by dominant scholarship; through ongoing conversations between the two of us and examinations revealed through class discussions, we both agreed that Chicano men in *Woman Hollering Creek* also suffer, grieve, and love and therefore demand a more nuanced reading, comprehension, and pedagogical approach than is typically given.

In this adapted approach, we find that men's strife in the short stories is muted or concealed primarily because male characters do not "holler" in pain *or* in triumph—as Cleófilas does in the story "Woman Hollering Creek," who suffers abuse but ultimately escapes—and because patriarchal oppression is so blatant. (One notable exception is "Salvador Late or Early," a story that comes early in the collection and which features a small boy's "geography of scars" from poverty and isolation.) We argue that the sociocultural plight of Chicano boys and men in Cisneros's story collection deserves to be explored and exposed. In addition to constructing and revising pedagogical approaches to Cisneros's work, this analysis will also contribute more broadly to the field of critical masculinity studies, an emerging field in which recent "endeavors have pinpointed a number of important issues regarding men and masculinity, [but] they continue to overlook the role of agency and reflexivity in these experiences, a concept that is vital to feminist research" (Waling 2).

We embark on this project by tracing our ideological shift in teaching Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*. The Course Background and Pedagogical Reception sections reflect a feminist *transfrontera* ideology, focusing on the silencing of women, male dominance, and patriarchal language patterns, all of which are built

on our knowledge of existing and dominant scholarship. In "Expanding Our Perspectives," we demonstrate an approach to teaching *Woman Hollering Creek* that includes influences of cultural identity, economic deprivation, and geographical displacement on various male Chicano characters. We argue for what Gloria Anzaldúa calls a "tolerance of ambiguity," whereby men are portrayed sometimes as oppressors, sometimes as victims, and sometimes as more complex, enigmatic figures that shed binary distinction (Anzaldúa 101). Not coincidentally, representations of the women characters necessitate a similar tolerance; for example, Clemencia, in "Never Marry a Mexican," seduces a young boy as retribution for betrayal by Drew, his white father. Clemencia's mother also has an affair while her husband is fatally ill. As a child Clemencia opines, "That's what I can't forgive" (73). These examples serve as warnings against essentialism of men as Anzaldúa characterizes it: "Lumping the males who deviate from the general norm with man, the oppressor, is a great injustice" and "[m]en even more than women are fettered to gender roles" (106). Our developed approach is an attempt to combat this inclination to essentialize men *or* women and pushes beyond prescribed structures of gender and other confining expectations as defined by cultural norms or dominant patterns of reading.

PEDAGOGICAL RECEPTION

Chicano Studies programs were developed on campuses in the late 1960s, continuing with the emergence of mid-1970s era Chicana feminists. With the "mainstreaming" of Latino culture in the 1980s (famously forecast by *TIME* in 1978 as the "Decade of the Hispanics"), Chicano/a texts have been taught more frequently in American Literature courses as well as in classes devoted specifically to Chicano/Latino Studies. Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* in particular has been prominently taught across several types of courses. Composition instructors have also used the book in various writing courses. For instance, James Ottery, teaching an Introduction to College Writing course, assigned excerpts from Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, bell hooks' *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, and Cisneros's *Mango Street* to help students explore their own cultural identities in personal essays. One Mexican-American student in Ottery's class was inspired by "A House of My Own" (from *Mango Street*), as a way to declare her "independence from Mexican macho expectations" (Ottery 134). In a high school English course, P. L. Thomas assigned that same chapter from *Mango Street* as a modeling exercise, whereby students could become "authentic readers and writers" (90). Other instructors, who teach literature, have used *Mango Street* not only to discuss racial and gender politics, but literary techniques, such as narrative strategy (Bérubé).

In contrast to the many references to *Mango Street*, we found only a few pedagogical sources that featured the grittier and more challenging *Woman Hollering Creek* collection. One article from *Radical Teacher* featured the experience of Linda Dittmar, a white "ambassador" teaching a postcolonial course in India. The students read *Woman Hollering Creek*, but rebelled about "all this whining and self-pity" that "doesn't help us move forward" (60). Dittmar followed these complaints with a lecture, arguing that the titular story, "Woman Hollering Creek," was actually an emancipatory tale. At the end of the course, Dittmar questioned her role as a cultural ambassador, acknowledging that students should have the authority to reinterpret a story's meaning from their own cultural perspectives (62). A more successful pedagogical experiment was undertaken in a high school class in Arizona. In "Developing Critical Consciousness: Resistance Literature in a Chicano Literature Class," Curtis Acosta demonstrates how students who studied and applied resistance literature to their own circumstances developed agency and became presenters at community events and even at the University of Arizona; many became activists in educational and immigration policy (Acosta 42). These successes are clearly significant, but we noted that Acosta categorized Cisneros's work (in *Woman Hollering Creek*) primarily under feminism, machismo, and gender roles. His categorization reinforces the dynamics of patriarchal authority, which in turn makes men's experiences, standpoints, and vulnerabilities invisible.

Such a perspective on the oppression of women has been reinforced by Cisneros's own commentary: that men are really much worse than her portrayals, and that she has "been rather lenient on them" (qtd. in Chávez-Silverman 183).

COURSE BACKGROUND

Our pedagogical approach, prior to reconceptualizing the Latino/a unit of our respective courses, privileges the "minority" terms: Latinas, women, homosexuals, Mexicans, Spanish, among others. They reflect the predominant ideologies informing Cisneros's collection: patriarchy, colonialism, and folk Catholicism. Therefore, we appropriated Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* as an ideological primer for interpreting the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek*. Both of our courses began with chapters from *Borderlands* that focus on the suppression of Chicano Spanish ("Linguistic Terrorism") and the silencing of girls and women in "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." Some of Latchaw's class notes highlight the character Malinche's embodiment as a villain and traitor (in history and literature), Anzaldúa's struggle with double consciousness, and cultural gender roles/rules. Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands*, has famously proclaimed that "Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (38). *Borderlands* offers a memorable example of this cultural enforcement: a warning from Anzaldúa's mother that "Flies don't enter a closed mouth," meaning that she should strive to avoid "having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales, signs of being *mal criada* [badly bred]" (76). Anzaldúa reinforces this silencing from within her own culture along with identity repression by exposing the biased structure of the Spanish language: "We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural [os]. Language is a male discourse" (76). In teaching Anzaldúa we each emphasize how her work reveals invisible borders and intersections between Latinas/os and Non-Latinas/os, men and women, Spanish and English: for instance, educating readers about linguistic differences between formal Spanish, Tex-Mex, and Chicano Spanish and the status each confers. In class we ask students to consider how these borderland schisms will be manifested in Cisneros's collection.

Guerra's class typically examines Anzaldúa's descriptions of the "prescribed patterns" of Latinas leaving their fathers' houses in order to shed light on the rigidly defined gender roles that her work analyzes and deconstructs. Anzaldúa proclaims, "For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother" (39). While this claim expresses a hyperbolic capitulation of the limited, oppressive outcomes for Latinas, students discover Latinas' reductive roles as objects of sexuality. Latinas either repress and forego their sexuality as a nun, misuse and abuse their sexuality as a prostitute, or curtail and "appropriately" apply their sexuality as mothers/wives. Anzaldúa indicates that Latinas contribute to the growth of these oppressive cultural structures, as illustrated in some *Woman Hollering Creek* characters. Again, those women see that "[m]ales make the rules and laws" in an ongoing relationship of power; as important or even more so, "women transmit them," in the way that demonstrates acceptance, self-deprecation, and continuity.

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

To reinforce the patriarchal theme, Latchaw asked students in her class to answer the following question in an exam: "Explain how the persona in 'The Marlboro Man' critiques Latino *machismo* and challenges cultural values." One student responded to the first query by noting that the Marlboro man represents a manly type to be desired (for women) and an archetypal macho man to emulate (for men). He also noted that worshipping Latino *machismo* is superficial especially given the irony of selling cancer causing agents. Another essay question asked students to analyze the meaning of the title "One Holy Night," referencing the affair of a 13-year-old child (who gets pregnant) with the 37-year-old "Boy Baby," who turns out to be a serial

killer. Most students were understandably horrified and read the title ironically: for instance, comparing the "seduction" with the birth of the Christ child. The strong, almost visceral emotions elicited by these predatory scenes blinded students to historical and cultural realities that might have shaped Boy Baby's personality and character. (After later reexamination of Boy Baby's background and cultural experience, we complicated the question to include a male perspective.)

"Never Marry a Mexican" evoked a similar reaction when readers saw that Clemencia (the protagonist) seduces her former lover's son in retribution. A young male student in Latchaw's class, who had recently immigrated to America from Mexico, was horrified at Clemencia's affairs because they threatened his culture's social norms. "Having mistresses is acceptable for men," he said, "that would be no big deal. But for women adultery is a major taboo." The class exploded. Shocked and dismayed by the student's macho attitude, a cacophony of voices started verbally pummeling the young man about gender equality and ethics. Latchaw took a poll, asking the class if they agreed or disagreed with the student. Everyone else in the class said having affairs outside marriage was equally wrong for men or women. Latchaw prompted the class to explore the ideologies underlying cultural norms and social practices of both American and Mexican society. The Mexican student regained his voice by describing his upbringing in terms of gender roles, which resulted in mutual understanding and respect. Amiability was established by the end of the hour. In the Mexican student's final reflection, he said this discussion provided an important lesson about ethical concerns regarding fidelity and the ability to critically examine his own culture. The other students also expressed an appreciation of various cultural traditions, norms, and values.

EXPANDING OUR PERSPECTIVE

Based on our students' empathy for the plight of some male characters, scholarly analysis of "Remember the Alamo" (with flamboyant, poverty-stricken Tristan, a gay night club entertainer), and a masculinist reading of "Salvador Late or Early," which examines themes of youthfulness, sensitivity, and sacrificial responsibility, we elected to reread the stories in *Woman Hollering Creek* and begin to expand and develop our focus of *Borderlands*. We drew on Anzaldúa's warning to avoid cultural collisions and the tendency to become locked "into a duel of oppressor and oppressed." Instead, readers should seek a new integrated consciousness, reflected in the term *la mestiza*, which values "divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns… and that anticipates ambiguity" (101). This is the habit of mind we wanted our students to develop in approaching the stories sympathetic to boys and men.

The sections below reflect our rereading, highlighting scenarios where Cisneros's male characters are drawn with more complexity. In order to test this new interpretive strategy, we identified relevant passages, analyzing them with the *mestiza consciousness* in mind. These analyses include ideas for student engagement with masculine perspectives.

- "Salvador inside that wrinkled shirt, inside the throat that must clear itself and apologize each time it speaks, inside that forty-pound body of boy with its geography of scars… is a boy like any other disappearing out the door, beside the schoolyard gate, where he has told his brothers they must wait" ("Salvador Late or Early" 10-11).
    - As one of the most emotionally intense stories in the collection, Salvador suffers a terrible indignity of the body and spirit, and his life journey seems predestined because of his environment. In *Woman Hollering Creek* neither gender is spared when poverty collides with cultural isolation and invisibility. We also noted that the placement of this story as the third in the collection seems to bookend nicely with the similarly depicted male personas in the later stories in the collection, "*Los* Boxers" and "Tin Tan Tan." With this perception in mind, students might consider how *Woman*

Hollering Creek's structure of growth and development reinforces or deconstructs some of the binaries we have discussed.

- "If they are lucky, there are tears at the end of the long night. At any given moment, the fists try to speak. They are dogs chasing their own tails before lying down to sleep, trying to find a way, a route, an out, and—finally—get some peace" ("Woman Hollering Creek" 48).
    - This passage from the titular story provides an opportunity for students to interrogate the idea that borderland struggles affect both men and women. The narration implies rather than states, and the pronouns are ambiguous—creating gaps that are ripe for interpretation and suggesting multiple groups of people in trauma.
- "When my wife died I used to go to a place over on Calaveras way bigger than this… You know how to keep a stain from setting? Guess. Ice cube. Yup. My wife taught me that one… Oh boy, she was clean. Everything in the house looked new even though it was old… You betcha… Starched and ironed everything… Even ironed *los* boxers. But now that she's dead, well, that's just how life is." ("*Los* Boxers" 131-132).
    - This story, fourth from the last, is placed in a section titled, "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman," indicating what might be called an equality or coexistence of experiences between men and women. For instance, students have noticed from passages like the one above that men also grieve, although not in the same way as the young Salvador, placed earlier in the collection. Class discussions might draw students' focus to the narrative style and structure, tone and mood, and sentence variety to reveal/imagine the rhetorical effect on readers: their emotional responses to this husband's loss.

In several instances from our classes, we noted that students were beginning to understand Anzaldúa's warning about gender binaries. By recognizing the fluidity of prescriptive gender "norms" in line with Anzaldúa's "tolerance for ambiguity," several different students vocalized a need to perceive Cisneros' portrayals of male characters with complexities beyond a simple binary. We trusted that our classes were prepared to revisit the crucial and complex story "One Holy Night" in Section II as it provides rich opportunities to deconstruct binaries reflected in the story: oppressor/victim, shame/pride, fiction/history, and love/fear.

Students still required careful guidance to analyze the complexities of the representations in the story because the overwhelming *feminist popular* reactions to the seduction of a 13-year old girl by a serial killer were horror, disgust, and fear. At this point, Latchaw asked students to research the names of Mayan cities, Tikal, Tulum, Chichen, and the Temple of the Magician where "Chaq" (the lover in the story) says he prayed as a child. These are important and real place names that resonate with a Mexican, indigenous heritage, which on some level creates sympathy with Chaq as a victim of poverty, and perhaps even displacement and cultural erasure. In an attempt to more critically understand Chaq and the young narrator's desires and longings, Latchaw asked students to consider the following questions:

- Why does Chaq mention these place names to the narrator?
- What significance might they imply for both?
- What passages evoke sympathy for Chaq?
- What are the narrator's feelings about and attitude toward Chaq?
- Is the narrator ashamed of her pregnancy?
- What relationship might be implied between the narrator and the Virgin Mary?
- What does the story say about love?

The ensuing discussion of "One Holy Night" revealed that to some degree Chaq, as a representative indigenous Mexican, could be considered both oppressor and victim. With a clearer understanding of Chaq's deep connection to his ancestral roots and profound poverty, the students began to feel some empathy for

this sociopathic character. One student argued that even if Chaq/Boy Baby fabricated his ancestral history, becoming part of that ancient Mayan culture would establish an alternative respectable identity, both to himself and his innocent partner. It is reasonable to conclude that the young narrator was so dazzled by Chaq's transformation into a Mayan king, that she imagined herself as his queen. In fact, as a coming of age story, the narrator experiences pride in entering a "mature relationship" that includes romance and motherhood and contrasts with her elders' feelings of shame and fear. This divergence highlights the ambiguity of the title, "One Holy Night," which can be read satirically, sincerely, or historically, depending on various points of view including those of the narrator, the narrator's grandmother and uncle, and male or female readers. Such differences encourage a tolerance for ambiguity regarding morality, social norms, religious values, and generational conflicts. This ambiguity or acknowledgment of complexity can often create a disturbance in students' receptions. In light of such disturbances, we also ask students to consider Cisneros's insistence on love in different capacities as we have worked through the collection.

AMAR ES VIVIR

Due to the ideology of gender as so powerfully dramatized in the collection, universal themes of love and acceptance are generally overlooked. These desires are more directly expressed in Cisneros' poetry collections, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* and *Loose Woman: Poems.* The refusal to give up on love, even in the direst of circumstances, is a testimony to Cisneros's belief that love is a universal necessity—for young and old. As well as for both men and women. This theme runs like a river through Cisneros's work. Therefore we would feel remiss in limiting the *Woman Hollering Creek* stories to gender, language, and sociocultural barriers and conflicts.

While the relationships among life experience, love, and sexuality are not directly addressed in the collection, they are ripe for interpretation. Students can examine the earlier childhood stories in the section titled "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn," analyzing how a lack of desire for love might affect the ability to thrive as an adult. The three-page story that shares the section's title is narrated by a young girl who envies Lucy's eight sisters ("… the baby Amber Sue on top of Cheli's flowered T-shirt, and the blue jeans of *la* Ofelia over the inside seam of Olivia's blouse …" [Cisneros 2]) despite poverty in the entire neighborhood. The fact that Lucy's arm got caught in a wringer washer and that her father went missing are merely side notes in imagining joyful companionship at Lucy's house. The story closes with laughter between the two friends.

Even in the more troubling "One Holy Night," the thirteen-year-old narrator, whom readers recognize as a victim of rape, asserts her love for Boy Baby and expresses her superior knowledge of the male body in lilting, rhythmic language: "They don't know what it is… to look and look without worry at the man-bones and the neck, the man-wrist and man-jaw thick and strong, all the salty dips and hollows, the stiff hair of the brow and sour swirl of sideburns … and stare at how perfect is a man" (34-35). The jarring dissonance between the rape plot and the elegant descriptions creates dis-ease for readers; our students in particular found it difficult to acknowledge Cisneros's admiration for physical beauty under such horrifying conditions. It is also hard to justify the young narrator's later vision of parenthood, "I'm going to have five children. Five. Two girls. Two boys. And one baby" (35). Cisneros imbues even this young, damaged child with an indomitable spirit and a positive vision of the future that includes love and sexual desire.

Cisneros's stories show that to live is to love, even when love is experienced only in memory. In "Eyes of Zapata" Inés talks in absentia to Emiliano, the famed Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, about their lives together in the context of historical events and the trajectory of their relationship. Like her thirteen-year-old counterpart from "One Holy Night," Inés extolls the beauty of the male body, "I put my nose to your eyelashes. The skin of the eyelids as soft as the skin of the penis, the collarbone with its fluted wings…

" (85). The elegant language belies the reality that Zapata seduced Inés as a young girl and abandoned her as a woman, just as with the characters portrayed in "One Holy Night." Cisneros might be suggesting that admiration and appreciation of the physical body are valuable and even necessary in themselves. From a feminist perspective, Inés exercises agency through her narration, creating an aesthetic that is emotionally gripping. She writes Emiliano into existence in her own terms—"I re-create you from memory" (88). She also sees the truth of her lover's betrayal through magical realism. In escaping her body by night, alighting on "the branch of the tamarind tree," she sees "that woman from Villa de Ayala," Zapata's new wife (98). However, the story ends with physical longing, "My sky, my life, my eyes. Let me look at you" (113). Inés proclaims that vision, which she refuses to abandon. In the romantically focused stories, *vivir* (to live) is inextricably tied to passion, but has another resonance for women's empowerment.

For instance, the character Lupe in "*Bien* Pretty" proclaims through grief, rage, and art that *Amar es Vivir*—"to love is to live." This verbal arrow eventually travels to Lupe herself. After her split with San Francisco Eduardo, Lupe flippantly says with a tone of self-mockery, "San Francisco is too small a town to go around dragging your three-legged heart" (142). This is a quicker recovery than women in other stories, which shows a progression throughout the collection. Before long, Flavio the exterminator arrives and Lupe's eloquent and passionate words convey love as a sacred beauty imbued with their common cultural heritage. As with Inés in "Eyes of Zapata," Cisneros extols the male body:

> God made you from red clay, Flavio, with his hands. This face of yours like the little clay heads they unearth in Teotihuacán… Used obsidian flints for the eyes
>
> … And then he blessed you, Flavio, with skin sweet as burnt-milk candy, smooth as river water. He made you *bien* pretty. (152)

This time when the abandonment occurs, the narrator turns grief into a meditation on nature. The language throbs with the wonderment of grackles, birds Cisneros translates to *urracas*: "that roll of the *r* making all the difference" (164). Sensuality is transferred to description of the sky and the sun "setting and setting, all the light in the world soft as nacre, a Canaletto, an apricot, an earlobe" (165). Here pearl, fruit, and earlobe (male, in this case) have equal value and are equally worthy of adulation.

The meaning of *amar es vivir* extends beyond physical boundaries, as Lupe turns grief into joy—the joy of pure being. That she was able to reach this profound understanding may have originated in observing, experiencing, then extolling the wonderment of a lover's body, which is a rarity in literary fiction. In terms of parental love, Cisneros seems to question its ability to be sustained. For instance, in the title story "Woman Hollering Creek," Cleófilas remembers her father promising, "*I am your father, I will never abandon you*" (43). Yet, although Cleófilas goes on to escape her new husband's abuse by returning to Mexico and her father, it is not clear that the father will or will not abandon her. In fact, that paternal love may have given way to other forms of love: self-love, love between fellow women, and love for a new child. These are elements of love that students could take on from their own knowledge and experience in addition to Cisneros's many representations.

Based on this more nuanced reading, we have developed the following questions for potential discussion or student writing assignments:

- What is the relationship between sex and love in stories such as "One Holy Night," *Bien* Pretty," and "Eyes of Zapata"? What other factors might complicate that relationship?
- Male and female characters sometimes suffer for and/or glory in love. Why do you think Cisneros tolerates this kind of ambiguity?
- Some of the most eloquent prose in the collection valorizes the male body: "And when you are gone, I re-create you from memory. Rub warmth into your fingertips… To look at you as you sleep, the color of

your skin. How in the half-light of moon you cast your own light, as if you are a man made of amber" ("Eyes of Zapata" 110). You might also look at other passages in the collection that idealize the body. How do the aesthetics of Cisneros's writing inform, reveal, contest, and/or add to themes or issues raised in *Woman Hollering Creek*?

CONTRIBUTION TO MASCULINITY STUDIES

Cisneros's stories have helped us unmask important social forces that affect not only Chicana characters, but husbands, lovers, and even neglected fathers (such as in "Never Marry a Mexican"). We have shown how male characters in *Woman Hollering Creek* also have basic needs for food, shelter, love, and dignity. They too suffer the consequences of politically charged borders. However, we agree with Michael Kimmel in his sociology textbook, *The Gendered Society*, that masculinity effects are not often acknowledged in teaching British (and presumably other) literature courses:

> … not a word is spoken about Dickens and masculinity, especially about his feelings about fatherhood and the family. Dickens is understood as a "social problem" novelist, and his issue was class relations—this despite the fact that so many of Dickens's most celebrated characters are young boys who have no fathers and who are searching for authentic families. And there's not a word about Thomas Hardy's ambivalent ideas about masculinity and marriage, in, say, *Jude the Obscure*. (6-7)

To address what is yet to be unmasked in men's sociocultural environments and literary studies, we have turned to journals established within the last twenty years. These include *Masculinities: A Journal of Identity and Culture* (2014), *Men and Masculinities* (1998), *Psychology of Men and Masculinities* (2000), and *Norma*: *International Journal for Masculinity Studies* (2006). These journals explore sociological, psychological, and theoretical perspectives and representations of men's lived experiences, such as internal conflicts and social relationships. This direction is convincingly argued in Andrea Waling's "Rethinking Masculinity Studies: Feminism, Masculinity, and Poststructural Accounts of Agency and Emotional Reflexivity." Waling calls for a retheorization of masculinity studies that complicates categorization and typologies that characterize men in essentialist terms. She objects to framing masculinity as inherently oppressive and domineering (on the one hand) or victimized and subjected by social constraints (on the other). Instead she advocates a theory that examines men's lived experience in terms of their agency and emotional reflexivity. Such a focus privileges performance, what men "do" in their relations with others in sociocultural environments, rather than what they are seen to be or represent in essentialist theories.

One notable and cogent example that has pedagogical relevance to our work is "Refusing Masculinity: The Politics of Gender in José María Arguedas" by John C. Landreau. The author analyzes Arguedas's 1958 novel *Los Rios Profundos* (Deep Rivers), whose protagonist, a young boy named Ernesto, empathizes with the Peruvian oppressed, longs for an intimate and tender relationship with his father, and is appalled by violence and abuse. He refuses his old uncle's version of dominance, a "familiar gift of masculinity and its obligations… that cannot be separated from his [Ernesto's] refusal of the old man's economic power or his racism" (394). In that way Ernesto exercises agency, though what he does and says in reflective moments leaves him profoundly alienated from his father and other male role models. Instead, he finds solace only in nature and memory. The complexity of these characters' lives reveals the chasm between ideal social and familial relations.

Likewise, writers of fiction are contributing to masculinity studies by creating complex characters that defy categorization. We were intrigued to discover Rigoberto González's 2008 collection of stories, *Men without Bliss*. Even before cracking open the book, readers are immediately confronted with conflicting emotions: the disheartening title and the stylized image of a man with halo-like hair in brilliant copper leaf.

The resulting tension is palpable and symbolizes the complex realities faced by Latino characters of different family backgrounds, social and economic circumstances, and sexual identities. With intimate knowledge of his male characters' life experiences, González refuses to judge/condemn or admire/glorify them—regardless of their successes, failures, or flaws. In "Mexican Gold," whose title reflects the irony of the book's cover, the teenage protagonist, Marcos, suffers conflicting emotions (jealousy, love, rivalry, and guilt) surrounding the brutal murder of his half-brother, Roger. The reader's attention is drawn primarily to the male triumvirate: Marcos, the living son; Roger, the dead brother; and *Abuelo*, the sympathetic grandfather attempting to mediate tensions between Marcos and his mother. Marcos lives with the resentment of his mother, who has no compassion for the son who lived. Nevertheless, he is neither aggressive and domineering nor only a victim of racial bias (from his own mother), poverty, deprivation, alienation from his nuclear family, and grief over Roger's murder. In fact, Marcos has the insight and compassion to admit that his mother is "human, vulnerable, like the times… he hears her cry" (4).

González humanizes and gradually empowers Marcos by endowing him with agency and reflexivity. His character is a manifestation of Andrea Waling's call for a fuller, more complex view of masculinity. We see Marcos exercise agency in attempting to protect Roger from aggressive behavior (a brawl) that led to his tragic death. And later in the story, he decides to join the army as a way to make meaning of his life. Throughout the story, Marcos reflects, considers, and analyzes his actions and behaviors. He admits his jealousy of Roger, his poor academic performance in school, his guilt from failing to bond with Roger, and the troubled relationship with his on-again, off-again father. Marcos' inner life is revealed through self-examination and a balance of reason and emotion. In "Cactus Flower," González further develops emotional resonance with the character of Rolando, a migrant worker picking lettuce. We hear meditations on Rolando's missing, ghost-like wife, including visions in which "the deep ebony of [Mirinda's] eyes keeps her within reach. She is tangible and touchable like before" (35). The narrator dramatizes Rolando's withdrawal from the world in profound, melancholic, poetic reflections. The suggestion that he might have physically restrained Mirinda, "her neck in his hands" (39), is never elaborated. Such innuendos acknowledge Mirinda's unspoken pain and subsequent actions (leaving the migrant camp) without blame or shame for either husband or wife. In this case it's Mirinda who exercises agency, but Rolando whose discourse expresses loss and sorrow. González does not dismiss the plight of women trapped in their *transfrontera* circumstances, but he also ensures that we comprehend the feelings of men who suffer from pain in a culture that may more often recognize the emotional pain and suffering of women.

In light of González's portrayal of masculinities, we turn back to Cisneros's representation of male characters in *Woman Hollering Creek*. Boy Baby in "One Holy Night," Emiliano Zapata in "Eyes of Zapata," Juan Pedro in "Woman Hollering Creek," and the child Salvador in "Salvador Late or Early" are, to a greater or lesser extent, determined by the social forces that create them as hero, oppressor, or victim. Those characters that do have agency, like Juan Pedro the wife-beater or Boy Baby the rapist, use it to dominate and abuse. In terms of emotional reflexivity in men, the closest we get in the collection is through the eyes of Inés, Emiliano Zapata's mistress. She is pondering Zapata's struggle as a revolutionary in the Mexican Civil War: "I wish I could rub the grief from you as if it were a smudge on the cheek… You're tired. You're sick and lonely from the war…" (87).

Therefore, in revising our curricula, we intend to place some stories from *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Men without Bliss* in conversation with each other. We do not mean to privilege one writer against another, but encourage students to consider the contributions and limitations of each in terms of theme, characterization, plot, and literary technique. The following prompts could be assigned in essay exams or more formal papers:

- Both Inés in "Eyes of Zapata" and Rolando in "Cactus Flower" have visions of their missing lovers. What are some similarities in style (i.e. magic realism) and for what purpose are they employed?
- Descriptions of the physical body are abundant in both *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Men without*

Bliss. Choose some passages from both texts and compare the nature of the descriptions (i.e. beauty, ugliness). What do they tell you about the value of the human body?

- Examine the role of sympathy in terms of plot and characterization in stories from *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Men without Bliss*. Describe the origin of the sympathy (in each case) and its effect on readers.
- *Woman Hollering Creek* has been valued and discussed in scholarly venues because of its contribution to *transfrontera* feminism. What are some of those contributions and what are the limitations of the collection?
- *Men* without *Bliss* is a more recent collection focusing on men's lived experiences and follows Cisneros's collection by almost two decades. What themes, ideas, and/or ideologies have been added or changed from those reflected in *Woman Hollering Creek*?

Having expanded our pedagogical framework—by including a fuller analysis of male characters in *Woman Hollering Creek*—and researching advances in masculinity studies, we are convinced that critical examinations of Latinx literature must account for the complexity of lived experience. This means taking an intersectional approach to both feminist and masculinist theory and literary analysis. Such an approach would work to uncover the network of relations (history, geography, social structures, identity politics, personal values, family), that is, the context that explains gender construction and performativity. It also means avoiding essentialisms and moving away from the all too common fallback of hegemonic masculinity.

Scholars often determine what a particular story or novel is "about," and commonly that perspective becomes a consensus among literary critics. We have shown that the primary focus of *Woman Hollering Creek* is *transfrontera* feminism, particularly the oppression of women, which is limited and ignores effects on men, the nature of love, and desire for beauty. Likewise John C. Landreau has challenged the entrenched critical reception that Arguedas's fiction is not only about transculturation of "Peruvian modernity informed Quechua cosmovision" (390) through the lens of hegemonic masculinity. Instead he has read some of Arguedas's work through gendered male characters who have resisted and refused dominant masculinity. Although the adolescent protagonists end up in solitude, they have had profound moderating effects on their elderly male counterparts. Importantly, these relationships suggest a period of cultural transition. Thus, we argue that scholarship (literary and theoretical) in Latino/a studies should reflect the complexity that is true to the lived experience of people in both real and fictional worlds.

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