

**Crossing gender borders: sexual relations and Chicana artistic identity -
Critical Essay**
MELUS, Spring, 2002 by Elizabeth Coonrod Martinez

In her 1984 novel *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros captured the image of the Chicana who needs to create her own path, not only within her culture and society, but also in Chicano fiction. Women stare out of windows, locked indoors waiting for their spouses to return or for something to happen. Occasionally they throw out a coin to children playing on the sidewalk and ask them to go fetch them a soda at the neighborhood store. With the exception of Esperanza, the protagonist, women characters do not initiate events in their own lives; instead they endure poverty and racism from the society at large and oppression under the men in their lives. They do not get to choose their spouses, and when they do pick a boyfriend, and get pregnant, they are considered bad girls. They do not have choice--before or after marriage. Esperanza's grandmother had a sack thrown over her head and became the kidnapped bride of her grandfather. Esperanza does not want to inherit her grandmother's role or follow the path of other girls in her neighborhood: she wants to create her own path. *The House on Mango Street* is one of the earliest Chicana novels to indicate that a female character, as well as the Chicana writer, needed to behave/write differently than tradition had dictated. Esperanza desires a house of her own: "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own" (108). As the author's alter-ego, Esperanza knows she requires a space for autonomy in order to create her fiction and her self apart from the traditional role of women in her culture.

Since the mid-1980s, other fiction by Chicanas similarly reveals a strong female character (and writer) who creates her own path, with words, subjectivity, and images. Fiction of cultural resistance includes an inner discourse of resistance to patriarchal traditions in the Chicano culture. If the Chicana (woman) is to create her own path, female characters must also make their own sexual choices and control erotic fantasies. In such fiction, a sexual experience outside of marriage no longer brings shame or disappointment to the female character. She does not have to marry to find self-respect in her culture. Such characters perform as independent subjects whose presence is not dependent on another being, but rather on her own actions. As such, Chicana writers are not demonstrating political contempt for the male; instead, the strength of the female subject as its own entity is demonstrated, with action as well as presence. Many Chicana novelists and short-story writers of the late 1980s and 1990s have characters not only acting on their own sexual desire, but also determining for themselves how or whether the sexual experience will affect their lives. Such a representation of sexual experience signals an important change for Chicano/a literature.

This study will examine four examples of sexual initiative as subjectivity in fiction. Estela Portillo-Trambley's novel *Trini* (1986) demonstrates a Chicana (Tarahumara/mestiza)'s journey from childhood to her life as mother and

caretaker, but who at one point chooses to initiate an experience for sexual gratification alone. Alma Villanueva's fiction often includes descriptions of erotic heterosexual experiences, but her 1984 short story "Ripening" is an affirmation of the Chicana's multi-faceted understanding of differences among responsibility, maturity, sensuality, and sexual gratification. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's 1991 novel *Paletitas de guayaba* (Guava Popsicles) portrays a Chicana's introspective review of her early adulthood and the sexual experience she enjoyed with a Mexican who retreats once she becomes more sexually aggressive. Finally, in Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far from God*, Esperanza's lover Ruben appears good for nothing except gratifying sex. None of these male characters, the sexual objects in these stories, is ruthless or aggressive; rather, they are tender. But they also share a certain inability to action that the protagonists take on. In each of these stories or novels, the Chicana characters have had to claim a sexuality or sexual gratification traditionally denied them and considered whorish, lacking in dignity and self-control, while remaining true to their heritage and continuing to establish a Chicana identity. Thus, they rewrite the roles of gender within their culture.

Portrayals of intellectual control in sexual desire and experience reflect the strengthening of the Chicana voice in fiction and act as a metaphor in conveying the writer's control over the craft of writing. These Chicana writers are "appropriating the master's weapons," as Debra Castillo states (96-100), to show the female writer's attempt at female subjectivity. They are assuming the longstanding male writer's tradition of demonstrating control over writing by sexual and patriarchal command. In the traditional story, the male protagonist has adventures, suffers defeats, and learns through sexual experience--all to attain his goal of maturity. In the end, he is a stronger, smarter being, able to reap the rewards of his attainment.

Castillo uses the examples of two Latin American women writers to demonstrate how their women characters take the reins away from the traditional male role. In analyzing a story by Argentinian Luisa Valenzuela, Castillo notes that "the protagonist's weapon is not merely the written word, or spoken one, or fantasy ... [but] her body itself, and what she does with that body" (108). Valenzuela's protagonist must cross a limit, a border, which the man who always says "I write you" has drawn (109). To do that, she contemplates her body. "The body's needs dictate the literary form in the desire for appropriation" (136). Valenzuela "calls for an appropriation of language that asserts a woman's rights to an estranged linguistic property as her personal possession and is also involved in making-one's-own of oneself" (99). Valenzuela's character even jokes within the story that someone will read this and exclaim, "It looks æ if it were written by a man!" (100). Castillo also discusses a work by Puerto Rican Rosario Ferre, where her character wants to turn back "the weapon of humiliating and hotly embarrassing sexual insult, brandished against us women for so many centuries" (100). In both cases, the weapons used will be their own bodies as they create fiction where women possess a strong subjectivity. Castillo says that "to appropriate in this strong

sense is an act of hope, a call for transformation of social and political and linguistic and interpersonal relations, a demand for a different reading, for reading otherwise" (100).

Chicanas in the US, in a way similar to many Latin American women writers, are deconstructing the traditional, patriarchal language in fiction by writing their bodies, metaphorically representing social and sexual interaction between the sexes, to demonstrate their own command of fiction. They give meaning to a female body that has been seen as culturally meaningless (Rebolledo 199-200); the character's body and sexual actions becomes the writer's language. In her landmark text *Reading the Body Politic* (1993), Amy Kaminsky proposed that "sexuality remains the constant of women's subordination" (225). Therefore, if women protagonists were to own the sexual experience, women writers would own their fiction. In *Borderlands/La frontera* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa sees her body as a border, the formless "other" needing articulation. Chicana writers needed to cross the gender border and articulate the Chicana vision as a whole subject, beyond that of the traditional submissive spouse. In the following four texts, sexual disillusionment is experienced by the protagonists but their own lives continue under control, a representation of the authors' power and control over their language and their fiction. The sexual imagery becomes a metaphor for the act of writing or producing the text. In other words, the point is not that the male characters are good for little but an occasional sexual tryst; instead, that it is important for the protagonist to continue her journey.

Trini, the protagonist of Portillo-Trambley's novel, loses her mother as a child and has to move off the family ranch to a mining town in the Chihuahua mountains of northern Mexico where her father finds work. When he contracts tuberculosis, the teenager, as the eldest of three children, has to help financially, but traveling across town in a horse-drawn wagon puts her in danger, and she is kidnapped and raped, barely escaping with her life. She longs for the serene life of her childhood ranch and her Tarahumara friend, Sabochi, who played games with her brothers and looked after the children while their father worked. This friend had a spiritual and even a "mothering" nature to him. His voice is like "surging, gentle air" (Portillo-Trambley 18). During her childhood, Sabochi told Trini and her siblings stories of before the white man came. Sabochi lived in a cave near their ranch until his father became ill and he had to return to his village, but he had helped Trini's family get on their way to the mining town before leaving. Trini had trouble telling Sabochi goodbye. She confessed her love for him "as a woman loves a man" (22), but she was barely at puberty. He hugged her and told her she must grow up. So Trini moved to the mining town and Sabochi became the leader of his tribe upon his father's death. She would not see him again until, in a seeming response to her need for him, he arrives on her doorstep. She is advanced in pregnancy due to the rape, but again feels sexual desire for him. He remains in the mining town only long enough to avenge her, and then returns to his people.

Trini's baby dies soon after birth, and with her own father deathly ill, she realizes she must move to the capital, the city of Chihuahua, in order to work. Knowing Sabochi belongs to his people and his village, Trini, as a mestiza (mixed Indian/Spanish), realizes she must make her own life in mainstream society. She meets a waiter named Tonio, thinks she is in love, becomes pregnant, and gets married. He deserts her before the child is born. She lives with a friend and the friend's several children in an apartment, working her own job and also her friend's rocky, dry land to prepare it for planting a crop. But when she has a moment to reflect, Trini thinks of Sabochi.

Worn out from work and caring for the numerous children in her small apartment, she decides she needs to do something for herself, to find Sabochi and physically explore her desire for him. Trini travels in the winter to the mountains and a wayfaring station-type of cabin she knows that he will seek in his journeys for food for his tribe. She tells the Indian who helps guide her to the cabin that only Sabochi can "make me believe again." As she spends time alone, with the snow outside, she wonders: "What is the matter with me? Is it my fault? What drives me on and on?" (165)--all musings of a being seeking fulfillment. Although Sabochi is married, Trini plans their reunion in terms of her claim on him: "He should be a little afraid of me, she told herself. I could keep him for always. Could I? Can I bind anyone to me, to what I am" (169-70)? When Sabochi arrives, he is sensual as she expected: "his lips were running the length of her body, vibrant, ecstatic" (170), but he tells her they can be together only until the snow melts. She tries not to believe it, but soon the time comes to end their passionate lovemaking, and for his return to his family: "His eyes loved her with confusion now. He would shrink away from her at times when her passion claimed him, as if he understood there would be no escape" (171).

Although Sabochi is her ultimate sexual fulfillment, she lets him go. The protagonist controls the passion, she does not feel guilt, and she returns to a difficult life strengthened by this sexual experience. She is also pregnant by Sabochi. Trini returns to the city, where Tonio, her philandering husband, finds her again and asks her to join him in Ciudad Juarez, on the border, where he has found work. Tonio is not a fulfilling sexual companion, but she is married to him and decides to remain so. Tonio soon leaves Juarez for work in California, and a very pregnant Trini makes her way across the border so that her child by Sabochi can be born on the other side. Her children (she will bear two more with Tonio) will now have the American dream that comes with birthright, but Trini works hard providing for her children and to fulfill her childhood dream of planting the seeds she has always carried with her, in her own plot of land, something that could not happen in Mexico, or with her father, or even Tonio, for economic reasons.

While critics have tended to read a romanticization in Portillo-Trambley's coming-of-age story (Salazar-Parr 58), this writer portrays the difficult circumstances of the mestiza whose life follows the pattern of Indians and mixed-blood people left behind by conquerors and contemporary societies.

They lose their land and search for work wherever it can be found. Cherrie Moraga called Trini "the obedient daughter" of the patriarchal system because the character stayed married and did not rebel against the system (Moraga 162). Not all characters can rebel and decry oppression the way Esperanza does in *The House on Mango Street*. What makes Trini a strong and effective character is that she survives in a system, whether economic or patriarchal, that works against her. Despite rape and an unfaithful spouse, she wants to have and keep her children. Despite all obstacles, she holds true to her mother's memory and their shared desire to plant seeds in their own land. Finally, the character, rather than obeying society and her culture's dictates, chooses to commit adultery, and chooses (is not a victim of) her sexual liaison with Sabochi. Later, it is not a mate but a spiritual guide, the woman's own spirit or voice, who helps her obtain her land outside El Paso. The husband she has is a louse, and the man she loved passionately cannot be hers, but her life is one that, despite the hardships of poverty, pain, and struggle, she makes her own, whether striving to own her own land, initiate sex with Sabochi, or, in the end, reveal to her son that his father is not Tonio. The woman protagonist is always in control of her heart and soul, and her path.

While leading her protagonist down the traditional woman-and-motherhood path, Portillo-Trambley reveals the pressures and punishments of a materialistic society on the formerly rural, poor, mestiza woman. This story is an excellent example of Anzaldúa's philosophy of survival for the new "mixed" (race and cultures) woman:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, for ambiguity.... She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode--nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa 79)

The novel *Trini* has a perspective that includes rather than excludes, as Anzaldúa would say. The protagonist's life moves through three cultures without debilitating her. Her sexual satisfaction is outside her marriage only because it is not possible within. She does not find fulfillment in a relationship with a man, but she does pursue and initiate sex when she feels that desire. Neither relationship, with Tonio or with Sabochi, has anything to do with her dream of planting seeds in her own land. That is her personal quest. Despite her poverty, Trini controls her own life; her relationships do not control her or her pursuit of a dream. Portillo-Trambley reveals the stereotypes and hardships of the Chicana's life while following the traditional literary form (which may have been why Moraga called her obedient to the system) of a bildungsroman or coming-of-age novel. However, Portillo-Trambley's character's initiation of and control in sexual desire further strengthens the artist's voice and the character's subjectivity.

In Villanueva's story "The Ripening," the protagonist, Lucia, had "given her body away, piece by piece, limb by limb, to her husband" (Villanueva 78). Now he is gone, and she lives alone in a remote mountain cabin with her baby, subsisting on what she can provide and do herself. She builds a fire in the fireplace daily and, log by log, "reassembles herself" (78). When an emergency arises, a pipe bursts and hot water spurts from underneath the cabin, she grabs her child and goes to look for help. Her familiar neighbor is not home, but she sees a man and woman pulling out from a half-finished cabin and asks for their help. The "boy," as she calls the young man who comes to help, is rude and brusque, but follows her to her cabin and, from outside, assesses a broken water pipe. She suggests the closet inside the house as a way to the basement. He goes inside and his companion goes back to wait in the car, perhaps embarrassed, Lucia thinks, because the young, reddish-blond man treats women so nastily. He decides he can work through the closets and offers to come back the following morning. She asks his name: "'Jess. What's yours?' he says roughly. 'Lucia,' she repeats evenly, right between his eyes" (79).

Up front in this story, the author has shown that the young man is not nice, or even seductive, but the woman character is strong and throws his attitude back "right between his eyes" (79). After Jess leaves, Lucia reflects, "he's afraid of me" (79), and then she thinks about his big, strong body. Early in the morning, after banging on the door, he stomps in without glancing at her, toolbox under his arm, and heads straight for the bedroom closet. She looks at him bent over in the closet and notices that the curly red hair on the back of his neck makes him look like a baby bull. She feels annoyed as she goes back to her side of the house, but when he announces ecstatically that he has found the trap door to the basement and then promises he will close it up tightly so no cold air leaks in, she softens toward him and offers coffee, which he turns down, declaring that he works by the hour. An hour later he comes up the trap door, lets her know what he's done, and offers to get the new "part" she needs from town himself. They feel a "magnetism between them ... to their mutual discomfort" (80). When he leaves, she says to herself, "He is the epitome of what I cannot stand. I don't believe it. You do what I say, body" (80).

Just as Sabochi was unavailable culturally and technically to Trini, this young man is neither the age nor type of man Lucia may need. Although her mind assesses the situation, her sexual desire is in control. When Jess arrives the next morning with a softer greeting, she is aggressive in response. When he leaves the room, she jokes to herself that she is not even wearing red. As he works, she goes outside to collect firewood. She notes the weather is warming for spring, and so is she. With a new fire built, the house becomes alive with "a crackling red energy" (81). She makes more coffee and goes outside for new wood. She is startled to find Jess in the kitchen when she returns, sitting with his legs spread, a cup of coffee in his hand, and talking to the baby. She pays him for his work, and then asks his age. "26," he replies. "My oldest son is 20" (82), she retorts and he smiles. As he is leaving, he asks to come by that evening and what type of wine she prefers. She feels "hollow but good" (82) as she does her afternoon

chores. Jess has responded to Lucia's directness and interest, but it is still the female character who chooses the seduction. Villanueva demonstrates this with language. That night Jess arrives and tosses his vest on a chair, revealing "very nice shoulders, his shirt tucked into slim hips, and that neck is delicious, Lucia inhales and exhales softly" (82).

He hands her an album of Brazilian music and the wine. As they talk he suggests she sell her house and go to Brazil with him. "We could even buy a boat," he suggests. "I am afraid I can't do that now, Jess, and besides I would have to be the captain," Lucia laughs (82), but she controls the conversation. He sleeps on the couch that night and the next morning she considers cuddling next to him as she sees him sleeping. Instead, she looks out the window drinking coffee, and feels her womb, nipples, and clitoris swell. She makes eggs and chorizo (Mexican spicy sausage) for their breakfast, chorizo being a metaphoric phallic weapon (Debra Castillo 108) that this character wields. Lucia obviously has the power to initiate lovemaking on the couch, but she chooses to wait for his timing. Jess offers to return that night with a pizza. When he does, they tease and play but make no moves toward each other. He then offers to take her to dinner the next night. At the restaurant they share a pitcher of sangria, Lucia seductively placing pieces of fruit into his mouth while other patrons smile. They return home to make love in the moonlight. He gives her oral orgasm and then his occurs abruptly. He is embarrassed and apologizes, but she tells him he has been a wonderful lover. Villanueva has reversed the traditional, patriarchal image, with the woman openly admiring the male body, receiving sexual satisfaction from the lover, and then assuaging the lover's shyness and embarrassment.

The next morning Lucia ecstatically breathes coffee into her cells and begins preparing "omelettes as sensual as she feels" (87). She is suddenly interrupted by Jess: "'Look, I'm going down to the job. I'll get some coffee there.' Jess is not looking at her, he is speaking to a stool or the floor, but definitely not her" (88). She tries to explain about the omelettes, but he says he is not hungry. She touches his face, but he is closed up and cold. He leaves, responding when she asks, that he will return at eight that night.

"He is embarrassed because he came too soon," she says to herself, "he is embarrassed because he is young; he is embarrassed because I know" (88). Villanueva has appropriated the traditional male weapons; the character "knows," is in control, and her lover is the object of her sexual interest, thus without control. That evening Jess does not arrive until after 10, with a friend in tow, and tells her they are headed to Tahoe and that she should come with them. She says that she cannot leave the baby, and he responds with satisfaction, "that's a bummer having to take care of a kid every day" (88). She is angry and tells him someone took care of him when he was a baby.

He leaves and they do not see each other again, but one day she dreams she sees his pickup truck parked in front of a cave, symbolically representing the

womb, the locus of procreation and birth, and for Jung the origin of artistic creation (Biederman 104, 227). A cave can also symbolize an entrapment for human beings until they develop knowing, and for Native American peoples a holy place and the origins of the human race (Biederman 60). Lucia brought Jess into her sexual desire (and her subconscious), but he did not penetrate her sexually, therefore she still controls her subjectivity, just as the author controls the literary creation. Lucia understands better because she brought him into her "cave," her subconscious; she does not need for him to be a spouse. The protagonist pursued and obtained what she was seeking, sexual satisfaction. Villanueva's story ends with these words: "Lucia's husband had given her the mastery of the masculine. And Jess gave her the freedom."

The protagonist of this story is satisfied with and then disappointed in her lover, but she is a stronger person in the end. He is not to remain with her, but that is not necessary. Amy Kaminsky says that subjectivity can be redeemed from isolation, and from representation itself, by the notion of presence. Presence is associated with performance (24-25). Lucia reaches orgasm with her companion but he does not control his. He feels embarrassed by his lack of control in performance but she feels strong. A new subjectivity, a stronger Chicana voice, emerges in this story; the protagonist has control over the sexual scene, and Villanueva authority in her writing in constructing the non-traditional subject. In both Portillo-Trambley's and Villanueva's stories, the men desired by the women characters are quiet, sensitive, and in the latter case, young. They do not have the authority or strength of the protagonists.

In the following two stories, the sexual objects do not even speak, and they are equally unable to provide sustenance. In Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's short novel in Spanish *Paletitas de guayaba* (Guava Popsicles), a Chicana, Mari, travels by train to Mexico City to study. She meets and becomes lovers with Sergio, with whom she holds continuous discussions analyzing the influences of Mexicans on Chicanos, Chicanos on Mexicans, and Aztec and Spanish influences on both. The protagonist's subjectivity in this novel emerges in her examination of her family background and New Mexican Hispanic history, and even crosses gender lines as she assumes dominance in her sexual relationship. When she talks to Sergio, the object of her reflections, Mari merges subject and object: "??Sabes algo? No te (me) entiendo" [You know something? I don't understand you(me) (Gonzales-Berry 53).] They become a "nosotros" [us] that comes from within. But she, the woman's voice, controls the subjectivity. Mari thinks about this in the novel: "Se habran preguntado por que es que no le he dado ni voz ni corporeidad a el" [You must have asked yourselves more than once why it is that I have given him neither voice nor body (39)]. She then teases with a smorgasbord of answers:

ofrezco unas posibilidades ...: 1) la tecnica la vi en la novela de un escritor mexicano, y me impresiono mucho; 2) no lo recuerdo bien, o, lo recuerdo muy bien pero es tan dulce el dolor de ese recuerdo que no quiero compartirlo; 3) el realmente es el lector con que Mari quiere entrar en una

intima relacion; 4) habra entre ustedes quienes diran que el nunca existio, que no es otra cosa que la proyeccion de su/mi/nuestra vision particular del varon ideal, o sea, el Segundo Sexo inventando al Primero tal como quisiera que fuera. (39)

[I offer a few possibilities ...: 1) I saw the technique in a novel by a Mexican writer, and it really impressed me; 2) I don't remember him well, or, I remember him very well but the pain of that memory is so sweet I don't want to share it; 3) he is really the reader with whom Mari wants to have an intimate relationship; 4) there will be those of you who will say that he never existed, that he is nothing more than the projection of her/my/our personal vision of the ideal male, that is, the Second Sex inventing the First as she wishes it were.]

As Tey Diana Rebolledo has said in her analysis of this novel, Gonzales-Berry not only seizes traditional male language, she undermines and overturns it, thus demythifying masculine power (177). This is evident when Marl tells Sergio how silly it is that males tend to name their sexual organ:

(Andale, no te hagas la delicada; no me andes con eufemismos; dale nombre a ese instrumento sagrado, vehiculo y portador del ego masculino, el verbo hecho carne, extension obscena, motivo de nuestro pavor, objeto de nuestro deseo, la cosa del hombre, la picha, la chora, la verga, la man-guera, la tripa, la estaca, la pinga, la moronga, la herramienta, la cara de papa, la trompeta, la menina, el pfiJARO, el pollo, el palo, el chichote, el chile, el chorizo, el bicho, el pepino, el pipote, el pitito. [??]No ves lo mejor que se siente una al haberla-lo llamado por sus nombres? [??]Verdad que el nombrar las cosas es encontrarle un hilito a la libertad? (Gonzales-Berry 52).

[Go on, don't play that delicate role; don't forget the euphemism; give name to that sacred instrument, vehicle and bearer of the masculine ego, the word made flesh, obscene extension, catalyst of our fear, object of our desire, the man's thing, the cock, the dick, the pecker,. the magic wand, the tool, the pope's nose, the trumpet, the bird, the dipstick, the bush beater, the whip, the prick, the mouse, the chile, the sausage, the hambone, the drumstick, the big banana, the lollypop, the cucumber, the percolator, the peewee. Don't you see how much better one feels about calling it by its names. Isn't it true that in naming things one discovers one of freedom's tiny threads?]

This phrase, and the novel itself, is, as one might expect, not accepted as being in good taste in traditional literary society in Mexico. However, Gonzalez-Berry's character's humorous outburst does not seem to be vulgar so much as to appropriate male colloquial diction; in fact, she empowers the Chicana voice and there fore her fiction. Rebolledo notes that Gonzales-Berry's intention in narration, "to name the unnameable, to speak the unsayable, to articulate

clearly without euphemisms the female sexual experience, is to find freedom" (Rebolledo 177). Gonzales-Berry's appropriation of the master's weapons is a metaphorical loaded gun, a female voice speaking the nicknames from man's language for his own masculine emblem.

These characters' sexual relationships are neither traditional, nor are they the representation of eroticized male domination of some supposed feminist texts (hooks 121). They give performance and authority to the women characters. Mari describes to Sergio how much more intense she finds her orgasms after they haven't seen each other for some time; her pleasure is a torrent of waves, crashing in a spasm, one after another, she says (Gonzales-Berry 63). Then she compares an orgasm to a sneeze, making both experiences normal and mundane linguistic articulations. The protagonist's sexual fulfillment and pleasure are known only to the reader; her sexual object's reactions are known to us only through her words.

Mari, the subject, also plays with language. She addresses Sergio, the object, in feminine gender: "no te hagas la delicada" (don't be so [feminine gender] sensitive), and refers to the organ as either or both genders: "haberla-lo llamado por sus nombres" (having named [feminine gender for it]fit by their names), Gonzales-Berry not only inverts traditional male voice and transcends female subjectivity, but she also inverts gender. The male keeps quiet while the female unabashedly speaks the euphemisms for his organ. Sergio never has voice within the novel. Anzaldua says the "work of the mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (81), which Gonzales-Berry achieves.

It is the articulation of their sexual relationship that gives the subject in this novel the opportunity to critique the rules of traditional narrative and its rigid idea of the hero's journey and the hero's aggressive, male acts:

el hombre se ve forzado a ser el agresor, a rondar el balcon, a acechar a su victima, y asi se van desarrollando las sutilezas, y las no tan sutilezas, de lo que deberia ser acto intimo, humano y libertador, pero queen realidad ha sido distorsionado y deshumanizado por reglas sociales.
(54)

[Man finds himself forced to be the aggressor, to prowl the balcony, to stalk his victim, and that is how the subtleties develop, and the not-so-subtleties, about what should be an intimate, human and liberating act, which in reality has been distorted and dehumanized by societal rules.]

If the artist's act of creating, or writing the novel should be human, intimate, and liberating, like the sexual experience for the traditional male character, it cannot follow traditional paradigms. In Gonzales-Berry's novel, the

woman/subject takes control of the sexual act by describing sexual organs, sexual pleasure, and articulating sexual desire--all symbols of the artist's power and control over her craft. The principal character owns her subjectivity and the object learns from her observations and initiative. Not gender, but subject and object are the players in the sexual tryst. The author attempts a genderless consciousness, thus reaching new consciousness for the artist.

Ana Castillo's novel *So Far from God* has been called melodramatic and sentimental by critics (Ray Gonzalez 772 and Stavans 38) who do not recognize the non-traditional voice in this story of a strong matriarchy. A northern New Mexico Chicana, Sofia, deserted by her husband (who later returns and whose gambling debts cause her to lose her family's ranch), raises four daughters who each take on different but strongly defined roles. Fe works in a bank and wants to marry her longtime boyfriend and settle down in suburban Albuquerque. She saves money for the kitchen appliances she knows she will need but that her relatives would not know to buy for wedding girls, and her goal for the "good life" or mainstream leads her to work in a chemical company where she contracts cancer and dies. After Caridad is deserted by the love of her youth, she follows her father's path, going from bar to bar and sleeping with strangers. But one day she is beaten, mutilated, and left nearly for dead. When she eventually recovers, she apprentices to become a curandera, and in a slow, agonizing manner, falls in love with a native American woman. "La Loca" is the nickname of the youngest daughter, who resurrects from her casket at age three, and shies from people with the exception of female family members, preferring the care of horses.

The eldest daughter, Esperanza ("hope" in English; possibly expressing a desire for a new role in literature), is the college-educated member of the family. She gets involved in 60s-era politics at the university, lives with a boyfriend who changes his name to Cuauhtemoc (the name of the last Aztec emperor), and they participate in Native American "sweats" and other ceremonies. Esperanza gets a degree in Chicano Studies, but Cuauhtemoc, now Ruben again, marries a gabacha (white girl) with a Corvette and moves to the suburbs. Esperanza turns her hurt into new energy and gets a master's degree in Communications, then secures a job as a reporter for a television station. She excels in her work, becomes a newscaster, and is considering a job offer in Houston when she hears from Ruben again. His wife has left him and Esperanza, lured by the idea of a renewed sexual relationship with Ruben, decides to remain in Albuquerque. They also renew their activities at the Native American Church, where "the role of women and the role of men were not to be questioned" (Castillo 36).

Soon, however, Esperanza wonders about the routine of her relationship with Ruben:

Every time they went to a meeting, which was maybe once every two or three weeks, everything was good between them. They went to the meeting. Sometimes they also did a sweat. Afterward, they went home and made love

all day. The problem was that then she would not hear from Ruben again until the next time there was a meeting. She was beginning to feel like part of a ritual in which she herself participated as an unsuspecting symbol, like a staff or a rattle or medicine. (36)

Although Esperanza enjoys making love to Ruben, she is frustrated that she cannot share her work life with him; moreover, he refers to her derogatorily as a "careerist" while letting her pay for their food and their trips. She acknowledges that the only thing Ruben is good for is sex. Esperanza decides she needs to move on. She takes a new job offer, and then she breaks off with Ruben in the same rough manner he did with her. She telephones him:

I just wanted to tell you that I am accepting an offer in Washington (D.C.), and that I think it's better if we just don't see each other anymore, Ruben. Well, uh ... Ruben was groping for a response that would reinstate the pride just demolished by Esperanza's abrupt rejection, when he was cut short by a click. (40)

This character finds her own voice and her own path more meaningful than the relationship she experiences with her lover, unlike her sister Fe, who falls apart when her fiance leaves her standing at the altar.

Although none of the five women in this family secures a lasting relationship with a male, Esperanza controls hers, choosing to leave rather than be left, choosing her own role rather than remaining with a whimsical lover. The primary discourse of this novel is how these women try to function in a society that neither understands nor respects them, in fact, which works against them. They are much stronger than the men in their lives, who do not or cannot help them overcome the abuse of their society: companies that encourage employees' contact with residual radiation, the violent attack on a defenseless woman, discrimination, loss of lives in the Desert Storm war, and the loss of Native American autonomy by European conquest. Castillo portrays subjects who resist traditional roles and the hardships of their society while exploring their individual paths or callings.

In *Sexual Textual Politics*, Toril Moi notes Helene Cixous's idea that the speaking woman "physically materializes what she is thinking and signifies it with her body" (114). By overturning "patriarchal binary thought" (104), Moi says, the traditionally powerless and negative feminine side of binary opposition demonstrates another nature, revelling in the pleasures of open-ended textuality (108). Therefore she is wholly and physically present in her discourse. For woman's writing to achieve textual control, it must take on a "decipherable libidinal femininity" (114), amply demonstrated by these Chicana writers. Anzaldúa says the new mestiza can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense emotional event, a work that takes place subconsciously (79), like sexual desire. Kaminsky calls presence the recognition of the text as a form of practice, using a combination of resistance and complicity to existing ideological

formations (26), in other words, a subjectivity that reveals action as well as presence/existence. These Chicana writers demonstrate some of the stereotypes, hardships and oppression endured by the chicana/mestiza.

But their women characters also take the reins of sexual experience in their own hands. While Portillo-Trambley's character follows the path of the traditional woman, she enjoys a sexual experience outside of marriage which she initiates. Aha Castillo's characters espouse cultural traditions but all (with the exception of Fe) openly rebel against the role of subservient wife or lover. Villanueva and Gonzalez-Berry's characters contemplate and analyze their sexual roles as single women while their authors describe their orgasms on the pages of fiction. Each author enters unmarked territory and has female characters take the lead in sexual prowess.

A borderland is a vague and determined place created by emotional residue, according to Anzaldua. These texts are borderlands where the women characters have crossed the borders of their bodies by initiating and controlling the sexual experience. In so doing, the text achieves new subjectivity. As noted in one of the early studies on female subjectivity, "deconstruction tends to locate meaning in areas which traditional criticism has seen as marginal--in the metaphors, the set of oppositions or the hierarchies of terms ... [and] to identify in the text the contrary meanings which are the inevitable condition of its existence as a signifying practice" (Belsey 54).

In earlier Chicano writing, where the struggle against economic and racist conditions took precedence, the heterosexual relationship was relegated to a vague, unexamined status. But these Chicana writers now use sexual desire and fleeting sexual experiences to show the subconscious at work in artistic creation, and ultimately, the artist's command in the creation of new texts. In each story, the subjects desire a particular man and a fulfilling sexual relationship. They are never forced into the specific sexual liaison; they desire it. They willingly initiate a sexual experience that may not be accepted or condoned in their societies, and one that signifies pleasure more than risk for each character. However, the sexual experience is only what it is, gratification and exploration along the path--or journey--of each character's development. The sexual experience provides these characters with desired knowledge and control along their journey, while it provides the authors with the metaphorical language to explore and dominate their narratives. The result is a fiction that inverts traditional female characters, giving them traditionally male sexual roles. The subjectivity in these stories by Chicanas erases gender and presences a principal character who possesses sexual drive as well as a drive for human life and experience.

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