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Re-Inventing Themselves: Forging a Latina Identity

Latina Literature reflects the Latina's process of forming an intercultural identity within the United States. This is a process of struggle, self-discovery and self-affirmation. The Latina not only has to fight against stereotypes and against discrimination based on race, gender and class; she also has to revise her own latino culture by confronting patriarchal norms and imposed roles. Latina narrative also reveals the emerging Latina feminist consciousness among women of color and it further gives voice to the Latina lesbian discourse. It is through their texts that these women re-invent themselves, their "stories", creating a new self/text unique in its own right.

1. FIGHTING PATRIARCHY

Latinas as wives and mothers

In a first stage in their writing, Latina writers tend to pose this kind of questions: what is it to be Latina? What am I supposed to be like? Which are the roles available to me to become a Latina? Are these roles appropriate for me? IN which ways do this role constraint me?

To find their identity as Latinas, these writers need to revise their own culture and the gender-restrictive traditions that prevent from becoming real subjects with their own voice.

In the Latino culture women have always been portrayed according to some fixed roles: the mother, the wife and the "bad" woman, that is any woman who goes against these roles and by doing so becomes either a bad mother, a bad wife or a "free" woman, that is, a whore.

The images by which women are defined are usually found in the dichotomy of two opposite roles as Ana Castillo points out:

In modern man's schema woman must choose between one of the two polarized roles, that of mother as portrayed by the Virgin Mary vs. That of whore/traitor Eve. These two roles were

revisited upon Mexicans in the figures of la Virgen de Guadalupe and Malintzin. Man's fear of his own death, which invariably will be linked to woman caused the perpetuation of contemptible female figures such as Lilith, Eve, “La Malinche.” (Massacre 116).

We could ask ourselves what advantage men can get from creating a positive female model as the one of the Virgin. Of course, this model has its function within the patriarchal system. In fact, the model of the “Virgin Mother” is one of the most constraining for women. This religious figure is seen as the ultimate symbol which women should live up to. She embodies motherhood, purity and endurance. In this way this model comes to reinforce patriarchal norms which require from a woman to follow the ideal of a self-sacrificing existence, women should always be there to serve others, the men. However, this model goes against any attempt of self-fulfillment. A person who is coerced into defining herself by other people, men and children is not likely to lead an exciting or full life for herself. This also promotes a dependency on the family and husband, which once again promotes the patriarchal order.

The Virgin also embraces the ideal of femininity which is defined as purity and love for others. Thus, femininity is not likely to be found in a woman who rejects the roles of mother and wife.

A female figure opposite to that of the Virgin Mary is that of the whore. In Chicano culture the whore is represented by two figures, one historical and the other taken from an old legend: la Malinche y la Llorona. In general, the “bad woman” is seen as the opposite pole in the dichotomy virgin/whore. “The whore”, is an epithet reserved for women who refuse to limit themselves to the sanctioned virgin/mother role. It is not so much because of their proclivities toward sins of the flesh that women become evil, but rather, because of their refusal to abide by patriarchal dictates of ownership. In refusing to accept the ideal pattern of female behaviour; women shun the machinery, the main cog of which is respect, designed to protect and consequently dominate them, thereby creating chaos and threatening to destabilize the system by usurping male privilege. In order to discourage such behavior, noncooperative (evil) women are marginalized, stigmatized, and censured: they are condemned to be *La Puta*. (Gonzales-Berry34). This negative pole of the dichotomy is a necessary one so that all women who do not apply to the virgin features can be automatically applied the whore image. There is not a middle ground or any other possible category

for women within this patriarchal system. There is only one possibility for the Latina who does not want to follow the patriarchal rules; to re-invent a new way of living as a woman but this is extremely difficult in a patriarchal world where definitions of what is masculine and feminine and gender roles are seen as pre-established social or religious dogmas. The main problem with patriarchy is that women's roles are constructed as dichotomies where a term directly depends on the meaning of the other and there is no other possibility left.

A woman can be called a whore even when she does not go with men but her sexuality and pleasure is displayed without acknowledging man's power. Ortiz Cofer wrote a very interesting short story in which a woman suffers from “fits” in which she is sexually possessed by something in her dreams. She is humiliated, insulted and accused by her husband (whose name is Casto, chaste!). She is always passive when he has sex with her (and that is what he expects from her) so he can't stand watching her wife having pleasure in her dreams without acknowledging him as husband:

“her actions were lewd and vulgar...What was even harder for him to bear was her enjoyment. Yes, this was difficult, watching her total enjoyment of this whole disgusting business!... He was still a man after all, a macho, master of his home, someone to be reckoned with, not be pushed out!...he, as a man, had his needs, and this would surely make him ill” (Latin 11-12).

Of course his reaction is not to try to understand what is wrong (or right!) with his wife but automatically call her a whore as a reaction of his manhood being threatened: “Stop it,... stop, you bitch!... Puta! Whore!” (13)

In “Free Women” by Alma Villanueva, a group of professional Latinas who come together to attend a convention of therapists and psychiatrists go to the beach in Mexico and inevitably confront the Mexican men's labelling of these “free women”: ““Take this to La Doctora Puta. She wants more,” the bartender told the boy... He liked being included in the men's conversation and their secret ridicule of the *pochas*” (71).

“See, she lowers her eyes as she approaches the camera like she's supposed to. Decent girls never look you directly in the face. *Humilde*, humble, a girl should express humility in all her actions. She

will make a good wife for your cousin...If he marries her quickly, she will make him a good Puerto Rican-style wife; but if he waits too long, she will be corrupted by the city, just like your cousin there (Silent 95)

“I am a bit appalled at what I have begun to think of as “the martyr complex” in Puerto Rican women: a good woman is defined by how much suffering and mothering she can do in one lifetime. Abula is the all-time champion in my eyes: her life has been devoted to others” (Latin deli 43)

Most of the times, these women accused of being whores are only transgresoras of patriarchal laws and have nothing to do with promiscuity or nymphomania. Latina writers present the cases of these women victims of their “pure” feelings toward men as in this example: “This is unbearable, mi amor. How could you abandon me when I needed you the most? Do you know that after my mother caught us on the beach that night she locked me in my room and called the priest in to confess me? I felt like a murderer on death row. I told him I was almost eighteen, a woman now, older than my mother when she had me. He refused me absolution and walked out of our house. Mama came in yelling, *mala, perdida*, and said I was no longer her daughter” (Latin 85)

Another recurrent image applied to women is that of the witch, the woman who empowers herself away from patriarchy and gains knowledge to overcome all the restrictions imposed on her by men. A nice example of the positive and empowering features of the image of the witch is found in a short story by Ortiz Cofer, originally one of the “cuentos” told by her grandmother where a man follows her wife in her roundabouts at night and discovers that she is a witch which gathers with other witches. It is interesting to see that the magical words she uses to fly to the place where they come together are “*I don't believe in the church, or in God, or in the Virgin Mary.*” (Latin 45). Later on he realizes that “the witches, that's what they were....

In Chicano culture is La Llorona. This legend had been kept alive by oral tradition so there are several

versions available. After coming across different versions we can say that the common theme to all of them is that she killed/drowned her own children. Apart from subtle differences there are two main versions: in one La Llorona was a young woman who fell in love with a man of upper social status with whom she had three children. After some time he left her to marry another. Enraged, she stood veiled in her black shawl at the back of the church, then she went home, killed her children and threw them into a nearby body of water and then drowned herself. When she applied admission to heaven, the Lord said that she had to go and look for her children and that she couldn't come back without them. And ever since, she wanders alongside rivers and oceans, weeping and crying for her children. The other main version goes back to the Aztecs. La Llorona would have drowned her children to spare them the miseries that awaited them under the violence of the oppressors (who may be other native tribes, the Spaniards, etc.). Other post-conquest versions present her as a cruel, selfish mother who was relieving herself of a burden, allowing for a continuing single lifestyle. The version most extended is that of the bad mother, opposed to the Virgin and also connected to the “almas en pena” from the Spanish Catholic tradition; souls of tormented people who still wander and haunt living people. La Llorona is related to water (symbol of death in many cultures) so she always appears in rivers, close to the oceans. She is known to appear to appear as a young girl or beautiful young woman but when people approach her, she shows herself as a terrible image of death personified.

[Eve/Lilith. As the Virgin represents the spiritual, nourishing and positive aspects of women, Eve/Lilith is the seductress, temptress of man's flesh and sexuality, and incorporates all the power that lies behind passion, energy, and desire (and certainly even the more threatening power of knowledge (Stevens quoted in Rebolledo 1995)].

On the other side, we find the negative images of women who fail to live up to the standards set by the Virgin. These images are models not to be followed. In Chicano culture, La Malinche embodies the image of the traitor of the race, the bad mother, the impure and selfish woman. La Malinche was an Aztec princess sold to Hernan Cortes by her own parents who wanted their son to inherit their empire. She became the interpreter and mistress of Cortes. She is known as “la Chingada” which means screwed, therefore, La Malinche is synonymous with being conquered and submitted. She gave birth to the first

mestizo, so she gave away her race to the conquerors. She is seen as a selfish woman led by her passion who betrayed her people.

Latina writers revise the myths and archetypes about women in an attempt to deconstruct the patriarchal ideology inherent in them that enables women to find positive features and sources of strength for women. In the case of chicanas, la Malinche is seen as a powerful and self-sufficient woman. She is seen first as a victim of patriarchy in her own Aztec culture and in the conquerors culture (she was raped by Cortes and deprived of her son who stayed with Cortes) but she finds strength in the power of words (she was Cortes' interpreter) through her role of translator. Though she had to help the Spaniards in the conquest of the Aztecs she made her best to make her people's submission to the Spaniards less painful. It is especially in poetry where we find these new interpretations of la Malinche. In "Marina" by Lucha Corpi la Malinche is seen as a woman betrayed by her own family (her parents sold her so that her brother could inherit the throne). In "La Malinche" by Carmen Tafolla, she is portrayed as a person who was not a traitor to herself; she does not see herself as being used but she sees herself as being intelligent enough to reach her dream. Her dream was to create another world, the world of the mestizo/a, la raza.

The legend of La Llorona is also revised by Sandra Cisneros and Alma Villanueva. In "La Llorona/Weeping Woman", a grandmother tells her granddaughter the story of la Llorona and gives it a national meaning of resistance against conquer: "When the great flood came, and the terrible men from the great ocean came, she turned her children into fish... It was the only way to save them... there were four of them and all of them daughters. You see, Luna, she saved her daughters from the terrible men" (2). When asked why la Llorona cried she answers:

"When la Llorona cried like that, so loudly- the old woman, Isidra, saw the river again: she longed to step in it, to touch it, to bathe- they would come to her if her sorrow was so great. Then, she'd take the black shawl from her head, making sure no human being was nearby to witness her magic, and scooping it into the river like a net, her children would appear one by one" (2).

Villanueva revises the legend and makes it useful for the new situation of Latinas in the States. Luna and her grandmother Isidra are united by the image of La Llorona. Isidra is both afraid of la Llorona and

identifies with her, misses her. She is afraid of her because she is a bad omen, related to oppression and abuse: “Let’s just hope you never hear her. But if you do, prepare yourself... Prepare to live or die. Yes, that’s her message” (4). At the same time Isidra feels like la Llorona when she sees that she has already lost her daughter (who has a lot of boyfriends and does not care for Luna) and is afraid of losing Luna because of the violence of the new world. Her fears are justified when Luna is assaulted by a man who tries to rape her and when she sees her own daughter hit her. In this passage we can see how Isidra almost embodies the image of la Lloronas as she says to herself: “May she not be like her mother, the old woman prayed for the child silently. I have no daughter, she added with her familiar sense of perpetual grief. Just the little fish the river took away, and I have no magic. No, not anymore” (3). Isidra mourns the inability to protect those dear to her in this hostile country. She can be seen as the new Llorona who cries for her daughters exposed to the dangers of life in America: “Too many gringos here, mi Luna, and no room for La Llorona. No, no, she’ll have nothing to do with them. Nor I” (4).

Yet, Isidra takes her granddaughter with her to the ocean in a rainy evening. For her, la Llorona embodies the re-union of mother and daughters and their tears also become roars and songs. In some way the gathering at the beach is a celebration and at the same time nostalgic desire for re-union with the mother. Isidra’s vision of la Llorona reflects the tortured ambivalence of the displaced. Loss of community among women is the demoralizing price of mobility. Isidra and especially Luna as the new oppressed and grieving woman take heart when La Llorona appears: she reminds them that they are lost but not forgotten, and not without recourse.

The new revision of *La Llorona* by Villanueva is a great one and it’s so strong in her book that Luna reappears as a grown woman in the three last stories in the collection. We meet Luna as a grandmother, sitting by the sea, reviewing her life: She has suffered any miseries a woman can undergo: rape and exploitation, failed friendships and marriages, denied motherhood, a mediocre career, abuse, poverty, drug addiction, prostitution. It is not until the end when she meets la Llorona again that she recovers her own self and value and this self-affirmation comes directly related to the apparition of la Llorona. Some year before she meets a woman who helps her discover the good things in her by reading books about women’s

self-estimate and she recalls that time: “But the moon said LUNA, loosing her tears, her flood, her music just for me...and then and there, I got an inkling, just an inkling, that me, a nada woman, might be *todo*” (146). After some years Luna has a new lover, a woman and she has become a poet. In her last meeting with la Llorona she recognizes her as the Mother Goddess, the true essence of what it means to be a woman including all her tears and suffering. Yet there exists a possibility to find the star shell (a recurrent symbol of womanhood throughout the book) which is given by la Llorona. Luna discovers her connections with her grandmothers and greatgrandmothers and acknowledges their power for resistance, their endurance and their support. At the end we find a laughing Llorona who finds her daughter lost among the miseries of this world. In this kind of epiphany she joins la Llorona and at the end she feels the impulse to write herself, her new discovered self:

With her small exclamations she was to make people remember, and she knew it would always come to this - yes, she would kill for it and that was the dangerous part. She'd killed so much of herself to come this far: a sometimes paid Professional poet, naked as the day she was born, holding hands with her perfect sister, Death, Muse, Goddess. Her perfect Mother who knew the angle of every thorn in her dangerous woman's heart, and who wept with her.

Now she laughed with Luna as they ran, full speed, into the sea. As the first wave engulfed them, Luna knew she was gone. Her eyes were shut tight against the salt and the star burned brightly making her see La Llorona's face, her body, her sunlight eyes, clear as a dream.

“I know who I am.”

She ran for the towel. She dried her hands and reached for pen and paper” (160-1).

In Sandra Cisneros “Woman Hollering Creek” we find a new interpretation of the legend (in other story in the same book she revises the old myth as we will see later on). This time the myth is given a new meaning. The stream is called ‘Woman Hollering’ and Cleofilas thinks that it is named after la Llorona. At the beginning of the story, the name of the stream is connected with pain through the names of the women who lived in either side of the stream: Soledad and Dolores. Soledad was abandoned by her husband and Dolores lost her two sons and her husband. Apparently the holler is a product of women's pain but

unconsciously, the submerged meaning of the holler is in her mind but she does not acknowledge until the end. She wonders if the woman after whom the stream was named hollered because of anger or pain: “the name Woman Hollering fascinated her... no one could say whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain... Pain or rage, Cleofilas wondered when she drove over the bridge the first time” (46-7). Thus, when Cleofilas experiences pain as so many other women in her culture, she is calling la Llorona and weeping with her for all the abuses she is suffering from her husband and the poor life in the States: “La Llorona calling to her” (51). Yet, it is not until she meets Felice, a single independent woman, that a new meaning is given to the holler:

“Everytime I cross that bridge I do that. Because of the name, you know. Woman Hollering. *Pues*, I hopller... Did you ever notice, Felice continued, how nothing around here is named after a woman? Really. Unless she’s the virgin. I guess you’re only famous if you’re a virgin. She was laughing again. That’s why I like the name of that *arroyo*. Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right? (55).

It is through Felice that Cleofila realizes that this hollering is no longer the rage or pain of women abused but a holler of triumph (therefore the laughter), of the celebration of life. It is now that women can begin to laugh with la nueva Llorona, “a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (56, but now water does not mean death but life). This is the new message of la Llorona as Sandra Cisneros says: “La Llorona doesn’t kill the woman or the children as she does in the stories told here along the border, she gives laughter. She frees the Mexican woman who was so bound to her Mexican-American husband - but through the Chicana woman who works at the women’s shelter” ().

Any woman who tries to achieve self-fulfillment away from motherhood (and therefore marriage) is confronted with society’s notions that a “good woman” means mother. The only two ways out left for these women are either the one accepted by society, that is, to become a nun or to become an outcast: a spinster (with its negative denotation), a whore, a lesbian or a man-hater. Becoming a nun is accepted because the woman still abides to patriarchal rules by abstaining from sex. In a conservative Latin American society as that depicted in a passage from one of Ortiz Cofer’s short stories, these options are simplified

being either mother or nun or whore:

“It was not that Mama endorsed marriage as the only choice for women; it was just all she had been brought up to expect for herself, her daughters, and now, her granddaughters. If you did not get married, you became a nun, or you entered “la vida” as a prostitute” (Silent 141)

It is also Cisneros’ “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” where we find a revision of the image of la Virgen. While some women writers (especially chicanas) such as Carmen Tafolla and Pat Mora see the Virgin as a passive figure created by patriarchy, a symbol of failure who “advocates acceptance and endurance, not action” (Rebolledo 53), for others like Cisneros and Demetria Martinez “create a complex image of a Virgin who is more powerful because of her contemporary representation” (Rebolledo 55). In the past, Chayo saw the virgin representing the passivity, humility and endurance of her mother and grandmother, a negative model for women. She wanted the Virgin to be active, rebellious, “bear-breasted, snakes in your hands. I wanted you leaping and somersaulting the backs of bulls. I wanted you swallowing raw hearts and rattling volcanic ash. I wasn’t going to be my mother or my grandma. All that self-sacrifice, all that silent suffering. Hell no. Not here. Not me” (127).

Cisneros recovers the positive features of the Virgin that are still valuable for the new Latina. That is why she reminds the reader that the Virgin of Guadalupe was the new name given to the old Aztec deities. Therefore it is by recovering the power and strengths of these deities (with many names, as many as the different names the Virgin receives) that the new Latina can find in la Virgen de Guadalupe by removing those negative features given to her by patriarchy to control women:

“How I finally understood who you are. NO longer Mary the mild, but our mother Tonantzin. ... That you could have the power to rally a people when a country was born, and again during the civil war, and during a farmworkers’ strike in California made me think there is power in my mother’s patience, strength in my grandmother’s endurance. Because those who suffer have a special power... The power of understanding someone else’s pain. And understanding is the beginning of healing” (128).

challenging stereotypes, rewriting myths: la Virgen, la Malinche, la Llorona, the whore, la vendida

Ambivalent relationships: grandmothers, mothers and daughters

As we have seen all roles or stereotypes imposed on women have at its core the common feature of motherhood. In the figure of the Virgin we find the accepted nurturing role of the mother; in la Llorona and la Malinche we see the destructive negative side of a “bad mother”. It seems that women defined always as potential mothers and this feature is decisive for their acceptance as good women or rejection as bad women. Womanhood is defined in male terms almost equating motherhood. This is such a burden on women that most of the times provokes the ambivalent and conflictive relationships among mothers and daughters. Mothers are forced by patriarchal values to instill in their adolescent daughters their definition as nurturers, givers of affection. Therefore, these daughters lack the continuity of nurturance that their brothers enjoy for the rest of their lives. These girls are condemned to give, not to receive affection. They are prepared by their own mothers to accept their submission to males and to fulfil their roles as mothers. Thus, women are reduced to be mothers and wives.

Latin writers not only revision traditional roles of women but try to look for the core of the problem in their own mothers. The ambivalent relation towards their mothers comes from the fact that though they acknowledge their mothers as victims of male domination by accepting the roles males impose, they also victimize their own daughters and therefore perpetuate the patriarchal system. Most of these mothers were trapped into motherhood unprepared and as victims of patriarchal abuse. This is the cause of “failed mothers” who were never able to find their self esteem and unconsciously prevent their daughters from finding theirs. Though this maybe seen as something very negative about mothers which may provoke even anger and hate towards them, Latin writers have engaged themselves in an analysis of this tragedy among women.

Esmeralda Santiago *America's Dream* is not only the odyssey of a woman, America, in search of her own value and self but also the triumph of this failed mother-daughter relationships which have as its ultimate cause patriarchy's denigrating definition and abuse of women. A similar example of 'bad mothers' is given by Esmeralda Santiago in *America's Dream*. Both America and her mother Ester are presented as mothers with difficult relationships with their daughters. Both of them are abandoned women who had to survive by themselves and live as "loose women". Both of them are victims of male abuse and abandonment. These emotional scars seem to be passed from mothers to daughters. As Rosalinda, America's daughter runs away with Taino, America wonders what the problem is with their being "bad mothers": "She didn't learn from Ester's mistake, why should she expect Rosalinda to have learned from hers? Maybe it's a family curse. Just as Ester left her mother with a man who promised her God knows what, America left, at the same age, with Correa, who promises she doesn't remember... America has no idea what she's done to make Rosalinda do what she's done. Or what Ester did that made her run off with Correa" (33).

Rosalinda feels herself trapped by the family curse of lonely women but realizes that she falls in the same trap when she elopes with Taino and he leaves her to go to the states (though against his will). It is interesting to notice how Rosalinda is always on his father's side (even though (maybe because) he beats her mother) and unconsciously she is internalizing male authority. She becomes what Ana Castillo defines as "the daughter of the father" (188). Rosalinda rejects the model her mother represents and respects the more powerful one of his father. She "wants nurturing but has also rejected her first female model and therefore does not allow herself to express her need to be taken care of" (189). This is clearly seen in Rosalinda who rejects her mother's affection because she can't identify with her: "Look, if you need me, you know where I'll be." "Yeah, I know where you'll be." Rosalinda turns the page of her book, as if she'd been reading all this time instead of staring at her mother wishing she'd disappear" (60).

It is not until the end that Rosalinda realizes the danger of male authority over women in her own mother who is almost killed by her father. It is at this moment when she recovers her relationship with her mother who has become a powerful and strong-willed woman capable of liberating herself of male abuse and domination. At the end, America becomes the "new Latina" model that Rosalinda will surely follow. We

can see their reconciliation at the end in the hospital:

“Are you okay, Mami? Do you feel okay?” Rosalinda caresses America’s hand... Rosalinda sobs again and oncemore seeks her mother’s bosom... “They say your story might help some women in the same situation.” “How would it help? I didn’t do anything. I kicked him too hard and he fell and broke his neck. How’s that going to help anyone.” “You fought him, Mami. You won.”... Whenever that night comes up, Rosalinda tries to make America feel good about what happened (324).

An example of this failed mother-daughter relationship can be found in Sandra Cisneros’ “Never Marry a Marry a Mexican” which is a revision of the traditional myth of La Llorona. This time Cisneros analyses the myth from the traditional view in order to emphasize patriarchy’s blame for failed mother-daughter relationships. The story presents the chaotic life of Clemencia which has as its ultimate cause her mother’s advice: never marry a Mexican. Clemencia’s young mother married a Mexican macho man who destroyed any good opinion that she may have about herself (she was inferior to him because she was Mexican-American, poor and not as good as her mother). Clemencia’s mother’s reaction is to hate him, cheat him and to try to pass this man-hate to her daughter. Clearly, her mother embodies the figure of la Llorona as the rejected woman who destroys the lives of her children because her life was destroyed by a man. Clemencia is the victim of her mother’s tragedy and she learns to distrust men and this destroys her own emotional life becoming a mistress and a cruel woman.

At the beginning she seems to understand her mother’s advice: “I guess she did it to spare me and Ximena [her sister] the pain she went through” (69), but at the end her rejection of her mother is complete: “Once Daddy was gone, it was like my ma didn’t exist, like if she died too... My mother’s memory is like ... if something already dead dried up and fell off, and I stopped missing where she used to be. Like if I never had a mother” (73) As Brown-Guillory suggests: “Clemencia is the voice of La Llorona’s drowned children. The question is whether La Llorona’s children could forgive the violence heaped upon them even if they understood the cause. For Clemencia, the answer is no” (165).

Viramontes presents another example of a “bad mother” as a negative influence for her daughter

who is also the victim of the mother's circumstances and is also condemned to repeat the story. In “Miss Clairol, Arlene is a poor, Latina single mother whose only concern is to reflect those models of beauty she finds in American society to please her many boyfriends. She pursues unattainable models of assimilation she will never represent and while she only cares about herself, she forgets to nurture her daughter becoming more like a ‘big sister’: “When you get older I’ll show you how you can look just as pretty- and she puts her head back, relaxes, like the Calgon commercials...” (103). She leaves her daughter alone watching television Arlene is a “bad mother” according to Latino culture (even a Malinche, a traitor because she tries to assimilate) but also a victim of her circumstances as single mother, immigrant and poor in American society. Champ is left alone at home watching television and therefore condemned to follow her mother's steps: “busy cutting out Miss Breck models from the stacks of old magazines Pancha found in the back of her mother's garage. Champ collects the array of honey colored haired women, puts them in a shoe box with all her other especial things” (103).

However, she cannot forgive her mother's destructiveness : “ While these mothers As we have seen the role of mother is one of the most constraining who are divided as good or bad mothers. From a male perspective, the mother a pure good woman (they still think that their mothers are virgin). They venerate their mothers considering other women always inferior but this does not mean that venerate womanhood. For men the figure of the mother is the only good role applied to a woman. Males usually complain about their wives not being so good as their mothers. Therefore any woman who does not follow this model of the good mother is a “bad mother” and consequently a “bad woman”.

Latina writers revise these roles of “good mothers

Latina writers not only have to revise the myths and roles imposed to women but they also have to come to terms with a history of women who followed those roles and transmitted them to their daughters and granddaughters. The relationship between latina women is of a clear ambivalence since the young Latinas feel the need to recover those bonds with their ancestors, their mothers who passed their knowledge and endurance to them but that at the same time helped to maintain those roles that constraint young

Latinas's attempts to find their own pace away from patriarchy. As Cherrie Moraga points out Latinas' fight against patriarchy is not only against men but also against their own mothers:

“It's not just anger towards men. It's not even that specific. It's a general anger. It's frightening us, too, to look at the ways in which our own mothers have cooperated in our own obedience, in not having our own voice” (Their Woman 130).

Although all mothers and granddaughters may have some complicity with patriarchal culture in the transmission of that culture's oppressive dictates, young Latinas tend to see their mothers more negatively than their grandmothers. On the one hand, mothers tend to feel over protective towards their daughters and are more concerned about survival and economic stability and this may cause some separation between mothers and daughters. On the other hand Latinas also see their mothers as silent, uneducated victims of patriarchy and displacement. This may explain the clear emotional ambivalence that Latinas experience towards their mothers.

Latina authors are reevaluating and revising the relationship of mother and child and specifically, mother and daughter. They go against the traditional idea that males define the rules and cultural values and females transmit them to their children without fully understanding those values or contributing to their meaning. Latina writers challenge the cultural authority of males by stressing the role of women and by emphasizing the relation mother-daughter instead of that mother-son.

Latina writers tend to find a strong connection with their grandmothers who are often portrayed as wise, courageous, self-reliant women (though they may have always followed patriarchal roles). The grandmother figure, while representing the link to Latina cultural identity, does not carry such heavy influences on the Latina's self image as does the mother figure. The grandmother's inability to speak English embodies the resistance against cultural assimilation as we can see Rosa Elena Izquierdo's “Abuela”: “She always said to me, “Remember your dreams because they have special meaning. Remember the yerbas...Remember these things. They are all a part of you - a part of your heritage.”... I just try to hold on” (Tashlik 75).

Grandmothers are usually the Latina writer's link to a creative oral tradition, that of storytelling, which she may revise and reinvent in her effort to create an authentic Latin voice. The editors of *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* acknowledge this tradition: “Most Latinas, in looking to find some kind of literary tradition among our women, will usually speak of the “cuentos” our grandmothers told us... For the most part, our lives and the lives of women before us have never been fully told, except by word of mouth” (vii). Grandmothers in Judith Ortiz Cofer's narrative are always wise, creative storytellers and also a means for the Latina writer to understand herself by approaching female to female relationships where values of resistance and strength can be found. In “Casa” the narrator acknowledges her debt to women like her grandmother Mama:

I saw her as my liberator and my model. Her stories were parables from which to glean the *Truth*. ... women telling their lives in *cuentos* are forever woven into the fabric of my imagination, braided like my hair that day I felt my grandmother's hand teaching me about strength, her voice convincing me of the power of storytelling (18-19).

The same veneration of grandmothers as sources of stories which teach about strength and women's bonds can be found in other Latina writers. For instance, Villanueva presents Luna's Grandmother in *Weeping Woman and Other Stories* as her only support and strength to fight against her mother's boyfriend's abuse: “Luna felt for the big butcher knife- Mamacita had given it to her just before they took her away: “Hide it, sleep with it, nina, no te dejes, nunca, nina, cabrones...” Luna remembered the soft, loose skin on Mamacita's hands, the feel of feathers, her eyes like an old captured eagle. Fierce and sad at once” (152). In Helena Maria Viramontes' “The Moths”, the grandmother becomes the source of ancestral memory and relief for women: “I always felt her gray eye on me. It made me feel, in a strange sort of way, safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel” (24). When the grandmother dies the fear of losing that spiritual connection with a long line of women and the veneration she felt for them is present in the beautiful end of this story about love ties among women:

“I wanted to rest my head on her chest with her stroking my hair, telling me about the moths that lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up; I wanted to return to the waters of the womb with her so

that we would never be alone again. I wanted. I wanted my Ama. I removed a few strands of hair from Abuelita's face and held her small light head within the hollow of my neck. The bathroom was filled with moths, and for the first time in a long time I cried, rocking us, crying for her, for me, for Ama, the sobs emerging from the depths of anguish, the misery of feeling half born, sobbing until finally the sobs rippled into circles and circles of sadness and relief. There, there, I said to Abuelita, rocking us gently, there, there (28).

Latina writers not only have to fight against these stereotypes and roles imposed by patriarchy, they also have to fight against those women who help to perpetuate them for future generations of women.

In Nicholasa Mohr's "Aunt Rosana's Rocker", Zoraida, a wife who has "sexual" dreams which makes her husband mad and who sits in her rocker every time he tries to have sex with her, has to put up with her mother's "good" advice about married life:

Mira, mi hija, I better talk to you... You have to humor men; you must know that by now... Tell him you have a headache, or a bachache, or you can even pretend to be asleep. However, once in a while you have to please him, you know. After all, he does support you and the children and he needs it to relax... I'll give you some good advice; make believe you are enjoying it and then get it over with real quick, eh? So, once in a while you have to, whether you like it or not: that's just the way it is for us. Okay? (30).

If any of these young women chooses to live her own life away from the power of men they are irremediably condemned as "whores" or "bad women" by women in their own culture. In Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* Teresa confronts her own mother who "wasn't pleased a second daughter had split with her husband and we tried to keep out of each other's way. Stones of silent condemnation were thrown from every direction, relatives and friends who believed "bad wives" were bad people" (29). We can also remember Villanueva's "Free Women" where professional women are called "putas" by Mexican men; this idea of free women as whores is already internalized in the boy who brings the drinks to the women in Tehbeach: "His mother had warned him to stay away from the tourist women. "They are all gringas, no matter what color they are. Mujeres sin vergüenza. Que putas!" (71). As we can see, this is especially

true for Latinas in the United States who enjoy more liberties and therefore are criticized (envied?) by women in their own Latino culture. This is what happens to the Garcia Girls in *How the Girls Lost Their Accents* and in *Yo!*.

In *Yo!*, we find another example of the internalized patriarchal values in mothers. Consuelo, a Dominican woman, receives a letter from her daughter in New York who married a Puerto Rican to get permanent residence but who is now beaten up by him. The only words that at the first come to this woman for her daughter are not what her daughter would like to hear but what she has been taught to think:

“My daughter, you must think of your future and the future of your child for as you yourself know marriage is a holy vow... And so my daughter, honor this man, and he will stop beating you if you do not provoke him for as the good priest has taught us we women are subject to the wisdom and judgment of our fathers and of our husbands if they are good enough to stay with” (106).

These women are clearly making it even worse for these young women to escape the abuse and submission from their macho husbands. As Rebolledo points out, for Latinas “mothers thus function at times to stifle growth and development; they serve as symbols of oppression, of a tradition that stifles” (In Vigil 150). Women are supposed to put up with anything that comes from their husbands, “including two broken teeth” (Castillo 14).

Indeed, physical violence and rape is a recurrent literary motif in Latina literature. It is one of man’s prerogatives in order to show “quien lleva los pantalones” as it is stated by a Puerto Rican man in *America’s Dream*:

“She’s heard the men talk about how a man has to show his woman, from the very first, who wears the pants in the house. Especially nowadays, when women think they can run the world. Even Feto, father of six daughters, says a man has to teach women the way he likes things, and if the only way she can learn is “a fuerza de puños,” well, then, his fists should be the teacher” (34).

Latina writers present physical violence and rape from the women’s perspective to confront the male idea of women “asking for it”, of women’s innate desire for sexual violence and to display the

traumatic consequences for the woman's self-esteem. It is very common to find a raped woman in a Latina book. Rape is the symbol of the subordination of women to patriarchal rules, “they become a “hole”, a “nothing” (Herrera-Sobek 175).

Violence against women is the way for men to reassert their power over women. Latina narrative is full of images of beaten women, women raped and killed by strangers, fathers, husbands, etc. Physical violence is the main process by which women are deprived of an essence. As Herrera-Sonek says: transforms women into silent, invisible, non-existent entities- as holes to be filled by males” (175). Esmeralda Santiago's *America's Dream* is the odyssey of a beaten woman to get rid of the destructive forces of Latino patriarchy and also a search for her own value as a woman. She endures his macho authority even though he is not even her husband but she is “his” woman and he has every right over her:

“He hit her if she paid attention to another man, and he hit her if she didn't, because ignoring the other man meant she was pretending she didn't know him and therefore hiding her true feelings of lust. He hit her if she didn't look pretty and well groomed, but if she looked too turned out, he hit her because she was drawing too much attention to herself. He hit her if he'd been drinking. He hit her if he was sober. He hit her if he lost at dominoes, and if he won, he hit her because she didn't congratulate him enough” (207)

Obviously, this is an annihilating situation for her own view of herself as she says after one of his beatings: “Have I lost all self-respect, she asks herself as she silently prepares his dinner” (91). It is not until she leaves him. Her daughter, her mother and tries a new life in the States that she will discover the true value of herself.

Villanueva's “The Edge of Darkness” is a terrible story about rape and violence where an Indian Latina is kidnapped by a white man who rapes her over and over in a motel. Yet, the character's reaction is one of anger and counter-violence that she takes from her past, from the ancestral power that women once had before patriarchy submitted them. The story is an alternate narration between the present, her being raped and the past memories of the rituals devoted to the Mother Goddess among Indian women. At the end of the story until she kills him in a re-enactment of woman power:

“Here, such this till it’s hard again. Wait, I forgot the fucking shell [Villanueva’s favorite symbol of womanhood is a shell;he pays her “service” with shells.]” He reached over for it and the knife went into his soft, white belly... She pulled over to the side of the highway, opening the window that faced the sea. She opened her purse and removed something small wrapped in bloody newspaper. She threw it toward the sea, saying, “This is a gift from Swift Hawk, sacred Mother. Mother of all life. Mother of all death. Sacred, oh my sacred, White Shell Woman, this dick is for you” (51).

Latinas not only have to fight against patriarchy in their culture but also have to confront sexism and stereotyping in the Anglo culture. Latina women are seen as “hot” women, as uneducated domestics, etc. what brings even more problems for these women who have had enough with men from their cultures. Ortiz Cofer comments on this in “Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria”:

It is a one-dimensional view that the media have found easy to promote... advertisers have designated “sizzling” and “smoldering” as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America... I recall hearing about the harassment that Puerto Rican women endured in factories where the “boss men” talked to them as if sexual innuendo was all they understood, and worse, often gave them the choice of submitting to advances or being fired” (150).

The media stereotyping of Latinas is also portrayed in Dexter Hays, Yo’s suitor in Julia Alvarez’s *Yo!*: “This Yo lady is... another maverick... with the added pizzazz of being Latin. In the movies Spanish ladies have roses tucked behind their ears and low-cut peasant blouses with little crucifixes like hexes above those heaving bosoms, yeah!” (189).

Another stereotype about Latinas widely spread in American society is that of their being uneducated domestics. As we can see in *America’s Dream* Latinas are substituting black women in their traditional roles as Mammie. Again Ortiz Cofer observes about the origin of this stereotype:

“Works as domestics, waitressing, and factory jobs are all that’s available to women with little English and few skills... Maria, the housemaid or counter girl is now indelibly etched into the national psyche. The big and the little screens have presented us with the picture of the funny Hispanic maid, mispronouncing words and cooking up a spicy storm in a shiny California kitchen”

(*The Latin Deli* 153).

America's Dream presents this Latina-type in America, a Puerto Rican young woman whose English is corrected by the children she takes care of. Santiago subverts the stereotype by making America become a strong woman and by scrutinizing this image of America from one of these maids's perspective. In this book we find a harsh criticism of racism and patronizing by Americans towards Latina women. America has to fight hard to find her place in a society which renders her “invisible” as it happens with American tourists: “She notices how they look right past and pretend not to see her. She feels herself there, solid as always, but they look through her... Those who do see her, smile gradually, then slide their gaze away quickly, ashamed, it seems to have noticed her” (30).

Many Latina writers deal with this stereotype to unveil the exploitation of latina domestics in the labor force. In Barbara Mujica's “La Despedida”, Rosa, a Latina maid is fired for asking additional money for working extra hours and holidays to adjust to her senhora's busy working schedule:

“Alberto me dijo que le cobrar cuatro pesos por camisa.’ La senhora Carolyn se puso livida... ‘Yo pongo un día bien largo, senhora,’ Le dije... Y entonces se descolgo con una gorda. ‘Pedazo de mierda,’ grito. ‘Pedazo de mierda (o algo por el estilo, solo reconocí al palabra “shit” y algunas otras barbaridades)...’Nosotros le pagamos lo que le pagaríamos a una mujer americana que hablara inglés y que pudiera llamar al doctor en una emergencia, que no estuviera aquí de ilegal, que pusiera ocho horas de trabajo... y tu te portas como una mierda con nosotros. Porquería!” (67).

Rosa is an example of many women whose income is essential for a family where the husband either cannot find a job or earns too little: “Al subir al auto le conte a Alberto lo que había pasado. ‘No importa.’ Me dijo. ‘Encontraras otro trabajo.’ Pero me di cuenta de que no estaba nada contento porque la que realmente mantiene a la familia soy yo. El no gana nada allí donde trabaja” (67). In the case of America, her independence depends on her ability to support herself even when this implies leaving her daughter in Puerto Rico. As Lourdes Miranda King comments on this situation in her article about P“Puertorricenas in the United States. The Impact of Double Discrimination”: “It's not unusual to find women working in the United States whose children are cared for by grandmothers or other relatives in Puerto Rico... The woman

is thrust into the role of sole supporter, creating the new immigrant woman and incidentally destroying the myth of the passive female” (In Sedillo 105).

But Latina writers not only portray strong women fighting for survival trapped in the lower working classes. They also try to suvert the stereotype by presenting examples of women who, always by means of educating themselves, were able to get out from poverty conditions. Sarita, the Garcias’ maid’s daughter in *Yo!* is an example of this. Her case is specially meaningful because she comes from a doubly marginalized group, that of black working class women in the Dominican Republic. She shares with Yo their being part of a minority in the States but as she says: “all of us aught between cultures - but with this added big difference, I’m also caught between classes” (226). Yo is surprised when she discovers that Sarita is her own boss, the owner of a clinic. Sarita is an example of the possibilities open for many Latinas and she wants to be recognized for that:

“Every time some of the Garcia de la Torre clan go to introduce me... tehy hesitate. “This is Sarita... the daughter... of a woman... whom... we were very fond of.” And I’m thinking, go ahead and say it. Shje’s the daughter of the maid who used to clean out toilets and make oru beds and calm our rages and wipe away oour tears. And then, please, go on with the story: she has made something of herself, the daughter. She got her B.S. then went to med school, and now owns one of the leading sports medicine clinics in the country” (226).

The importance of education for the improvement of Latinas is usually stressed by these writers. A nice story by Silvina Wood, “Dreams By Appointment Only” tells the story of Irene, a mother of three who was abandoned by her husband and who enrolls again at school after she quitted school to run away with her boyfriend seventeen years ago. At first she meets with her children and her mother’s unsupporting comments: “I can’t live on welfare forever.” “So get married again... You said Jose left you because he didn’t want any more kids and you got pregnant with Susana, but I think it was because of the way you are” (InVigil 87). At the end she continues to study at the new community college and gets a job at tey ned of the story: “And so, the following month, Irene was to report to work..Irene went to work in the basement floor of the new city Hall, as Mail Clerk II, and with her luck, hard work and determination, Irene

could, in no time at all, move up to Clerk Typist I” (98).

Up to this point we had the opportunity to see how Latinas fight against patriarchy, against social and cultural barriers, how they revision and find new strength in old myths and women roles. It is after the revision of one’s culture when they are strong enough to present new ways and solutions to the New Latina. We also find the recurrent figure of the Latina as artist, as poet, in other words as a creative subject. Yet, the product of the latina’s creativity is herself, the discovery of her identity and value. Thus, we find many stories of struggle to survive as active agents leading their own lives. “The Artist” by Nicholasa Mohr is a nice story about the determination of a Latina, Inez, to pursue her dream no matter what, even when this implies confronting her jealous husband’s attempts to control her life. As an orphan, she marries him to escape from her stingy and cruel aunt after he promises that she will be able to go to art school. He forbids her to go even though he is going to night school to become a lawyer:

“Remember, I told you how I planned to study art as soon as I could save so that I...” “Forget about all this art school bullshit! Me! The man... the macho of the house. I have my law degree to get, remember? And that takes money... Fuck your art school! I have to pay this fucking high rent every month, and now I need your paycheck... You didn’t bring a fucking penny with you into this marriage. You came to me with nothing, baby. Nothing! A fucking orphan is what I married... No way! You can paint your little flowers and still-lives right here. You don’t need school for the shit you do” (128).

She works extra hours as a nude model for art students and lies about her own life to her college friends but she continues her studies and applies for a grant (always hiding everything from her husband). Her “secret” life allows her to dream a better future and gives her strength to fight against a husband she hates. Her determination makes her lie and other to lie for her to fulfil her dreams. He finally finds her posing nude: “In an instant, Joe lunged towards Inez, grabbing her long dark hair with both hands. She felt her head snap and then a sharp painful slap against the left side of her face and neck... ‘I’m married to that bitch... that whore is my wife!’” (147). This is the step she needed to leave him and begin a new life with Aldo, another artist: “They made love several times. And that night Inez dreamt she was first on a roller

coaster and then on a ship- later she was running- falling- walking. All night in her dreams, wherever Inez found herself and whatever she was doing, there was constant motion” (150).

In their search for a Latina identity, these writers feel the need to tell the untold stories of women who fought against the abuse of men in their own culture and against the oppression of patriarchy and who fought against their miserable circumstances in American society.

Some recurrent figures in Latina fiction are raped, beaten self-hatred women. These writers explore the way in which women have been reduced to mute sexual objects.

2. SEARCHING FOR A PLACE OF THEIR OWN

Working women : roads of survival

Rediscovering their selves. Latina Feminism

Women who begin to love themselves after having failed in their abusive love relationships:
“After the last divorce she promised, vowed, to not live, ever again, with a man who didn’t love women...
“It’s like this, I think, when you have self-hatred you can tolerate, well, even love, a man who doesn’t like you, a man who hates women. But when you begin to truly, I mean truly, love yourself, it’s like your once-quiet, timid soul stands up and says, ‘What the hell is going on!’ (weeping 142)

Latina Lesbians: nobody’s wives, nobody’s mother

(Re)creating the Latina text/body

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“Re-Inventing Themselves: Forging a Latina Identity in Contemporary Latina Narratives”
<<http://www.uhu.es/antonia.dominguez/latinas/latina.pdf>>
