

Notes



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In addition, these two stories deal with a problem specific to women: the female protagonists of "Woman Hollering Creek" and "Never Marry a Mexican" wrestle with Mexican icons of sexuality and motherhood that, internalized, seem to impose on them a limited and even negative definition of their own identities as women. In "Never Marry a Mexican" the protagonist, Clemencies, throws her energy into defying the model of La Mainline, a historical figure who over centuries of patriarchal matchmaking has become the representative of a female sexuality at once passive, "reparable," and always already guilty of betrayal.

In "Woman Hollering Creek" the protagonist, Classical, must redefine La Lorena, the figure of traditional Mexican folklore who wanders wailing for her lost children, in order to redefine her own possibilities as a woman and a mother. On the one hand, the stories emphasize the tenacity of these icons' hold on Chicanas' and Mexican women's self-images. On the other hand, the protagonists inhabit a border zone between Anglo and Mexican cultures where the perpetual clash and collision of two sets of signifier, two systems of social myth, can throw any one culture's gender ideology into question. "Woman Hollering Creek" dramatizes the positive aspect of border living--the possibilities it offers for transformation. But borderland existence can be disabling too: in "Never Marry a Mexican" the ambiguous space between cultures generates only confusion and, finally, a newly rigid gender definition. It is the dialectic between the fluidity of the borderland and the seeming intransigence of internalized icons of womanhood in "Never Marry a Mexican" and "Woman Hollering Creek" that this essay will explore.

It would seem, from what China feminist writers report, that Mexican social myths of gender crystallize with special force in three icons: " Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingona (Mainline), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and la Lorena, the mother who seeks her lost children. " According to the evidence of China feminist writers, these " three Our Mothers" haunt the sexual and maternal identities of contemporary Mexican and China women. Cherier Moral, for instance, asserts that " there is hardly a China growing up today who does not suffer under [La Melamine's] name. And Norma Larson, writing about the name legendary figure, says, " the pervasiveness of the myth is unfathomable, often permeating and suffusing our very being without conscious awareness. " Concerns speaks, in her interview with Pillar Rand, of her own difficulties in growing up with a negative and a positive role model always held up before her--La Mainline and La Virgin De Guadalupe. These " ghosts" still haunt her, she says, and she writes not to exorcise them--that is impossible--but to " make [my] peace with those ghosts. In an interview with Reed Dissonance and Froze Seawalls, Concerns claims that the reiterative of Rosaries in a third story in the collection, " Little Miracles, Kept Promises," represents her own negotiation with the figure of the Virgin De Guadalupe. That story, which I will come back to at the end of this essay, makes it clear that Concerns considers Mexican icons of femininity to be intimately bound up with individual Chicanas' and Mexican women's self-images and self-esteem; to live with them comfortably--and there is no way to run away from them--each woman has to " make her peace with them" in her own way.

A borderland offers a space where such a negotiation with fixed gender ideals is at least possible. Where cultures overlap, definitions become fluid. Concerns draws attention to the shifting meaning of signifier in the border zone by using the same "border" phrase to mean two different things: recurring in "Never Marry a Mexican" and "Woman Hollering Creek," the phrase "en el tort load"--"on the other side"--can mean either the U. S. Or Mexico, shifting its referent according to where the speaker stands.

Likewise, "Mexican" in the opening paragraph of "Never Marry a Mexican" means first a Mexican national, then a U. S. Citizen of Mexican descent. Fixed functions waver as the words in which they are moored lose their stability. Concerns also puts the unitary definitions of things into motion by juxtaposing English and Spanish. For instance, in the story "Been Pretty" in the same collection, the narrator ponders: "Auroras. Grackles. Auroras. Different ways of looking at the same bird. The shift from one language to the other and back again implies a shift between cultural codes: the narrator is able to look at the bird from one side of the border, then from the other. And that "double vision" precludes a single authoritative definition of grackle. As with "grackle," so with "woman." A woman living on the border has a better chance of shaking off the hold of any single culture's gender definition because she has to move back and forth between Mexican and Anglo signifying systems, in, as Gloria Anzaja puts it, a "continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each paradigm. In "Woman Hollering Creek" the word "Woman" (and therewith the gender role) becomes unstable as it is interpreted first within a Mexican symbolic system, then within a Chinese symbolic system. While the Mexican woman, Classical,

can hear in the sound of the river called Woman Hollering Creek only the wail of La Lorena, a Mexican figure of sorrowing womanhood, the China Feline interprets the creek's sound--its "hollering"--as a "Tarzan hoot," and so gives both the word "Hollering" and the concept "Woman" a new definition.

Feline can go back and forth between cultural paradigms, see things first from a Mexican perspective, then from an Anglo perspective, and take her choice of signifier (and of mythic figures) from either side. Feline goes to the other side--the other side--of the gender border as well, appropriating Tartan's cry from the territory of masculinity. If border living means that one can move back and forth across national boundaries--if one can choose to see birds as grackles or auroras--why should the border between genders remain inviolable?

Why should Tartan's expressive cry remain eternally and exclusively attached to an icon of masculinity if Feline can use it to express her own vision of womanhood? "Woman Hollering Creek" thus opens up gender definitions on all sides to the fluidity of border existence. "Never Marry a Mexican," however, complicates the notion of subverting feminine gender roles by borrowing from masculinity: in reaction to the passive sexuality scribed to La Mainline, Clemencies adopts the aggressive, violent sexual stance of the "chignon," but that tactic fails to release her from the influence of the Mainline legend.

Escaping the crippling polarities of gender is not so simple as appropriating the gestures of masculinity, then. (Clemencies and Fleece's subversion of gender-- the one failed, the other successful--set up an interesting dialectic

with Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance, a dialectic that I explore in the final section of this essay.) Likewise, " Never Marry a Mexican" tempers the optimism of " Woman Hollering Creek" about border existence.

If shuttling back and forth between the standpoints of two different cultures can be creative, as it is in " Woman Hollering Creek"--if, as Anzaja says, thinking simultaneously through two divergent cultural paradigms can engender a third way of looking at the world, a messiest way-- inhabiting a border zone can also mean getting caught between cultures. Clemencies in " Never Marry a Mexican" is stranded in the interstices, in " the space between the different worlds she inhabits," as Anzaja puts it.

Both " alienated from her mother culture [and] 'alien' in the dominant culture," Clemencies does not fully grasp the meanings of either Mexican or Anglo signifying systems. " never Marry a Mexican" The opening paragraph of " Never Marry a Mexican" introduces boundary living as Clemencies heritage: " Never marry a Mexican, my ma said once and always. She said this because of my father. She said this though she was Mexican too. But she was born here in the U. S. , and he was born there, and it's not the same, you know. " As in Woman Hollering Creek generally, the ambiguity of border existence is immediately tied to the ambiguity of language. Mexican" seems to mean two different things within the same paragraph: does Mexican mean a Mexican national or a U. S. Citizen who identifies as Mexican? This sliding of " Mexican" from one side of the border to the other suggests the entitlement that Clemencies birth position gives her to a vision that perceives things from both sides of the border at once. But the ambiguity of

the word " Mexican" can also suggest confusion, and in Clemencies story Concerns explores the down side of being a messiest, the discursive bewilderment that can result from living in the space where two cultural systems meet and conflict.

As the focus of verbal ambiguity on the word " Mexican" implies, Clemencies discursive infusion encompasses a confusion about her own identity and about her position in both Mexican and Anglo discourses. In her interview with Rand, Concerns describes the discomfort of " being a Mexican woman living in an American society, but not belonging to either culture" as a kind of cultural " schizophrenia"--the negative version of Anzajass double vision: " We're not Mexican and in some sense we're not American, I could not live in Mexico because my ideas are too & Americanizes.

On the other hand, I can't live in America, or I do live here, but, in some ways, almost like a foreigner. In " Never Marry a Mexican" Concerns dramatists this double unbelieving through Clemencies inability to function in either Anglo or Mexican discourse. " That's & water under the damn," she remarks, glossing her own speech: " I can't ever get the sayings right even though I was born in this country. We didn't say sit like that in our house. " The disparity between the discourse " in this country" and the discourse " in our house" leaves Clemencies caught between, at home neither at home nor in " this"--her own--country.

Clemencies response to bicameral indeterminacy is to throw out the indeclinable ERM--Mexican. In the following passage she is warming to her opening theme, " I've never married and never will," by listing the men she

could never marry. But she is also negating the term " Mexican," apparently unaware of the implications for her own identity: Mexican men, forget it. For a long time the men clearing off the tables or chopping meat behind the butcher counter or driving the bus I rode to school every day. Those weren't men.