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The Short Story Cycle: A Marginalized Genre for Marginalized Stories

A Genre Critique of Sandra Cisneros' Woman Hollering Creek

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Abstract

The short story cycle is an overlooked genre, often dismissed by critics as a short story collection. This lack of attention paid to the interconnectedness between the short stories within a work diminishes the work as a whole by not acknowledging the value added by the relation between the short stories. In the background presented in this thesis, the classification of Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* is investigated with regards to genre, and an introduction to the short story cycle is given.

What I have found is that due to its unusual form, most critics have avoided discussing genre when analyzing *Woman Hollering Creek*, often just analyzing single short stories in isolation. Moreover, I have also shown that *Woman Hollering Creek* is not just a collection of short stories, but a short story cycle with unifying traits that invites a holistic reading of how all the stories add meaning to each other. And finally, through my thematic analysis of *Woman Hollering Creek* as a representation of the short story cycle, I have shown that it is uniquely suited to handle fragmented identity markers, and themes of identity that may resist unification. Through its openness the short story cycle allows for the space needed to portray a multiplicity that is not forced to cohere, thus it gives a more nuanced and realistic representation of the struggle for a Chicana/o identity.

To Edvard

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1 Introduction

The importance of genre in relation to literature is undeniable; it has played a major part in our understanding and analysis of literature ever since Aristotle's *Poetics*, and it is probably the most often used method of organizing literature. However, genres are not discrete and static; as authors experiment in their work, new genres emerge that may borrow characteristics from several already established ones. The short story cycle is a genre that exists in the landscape between the short story collection and the novel, and is seldom heard of, and often unrecognized in scholarly work despite it being a genre that has a relatively well rooted tradition in fiction. The short story cycle as a term for the genre was coined by Forrest Ingram in 1971, and its canon include works such as William Faulkner's *Unvanquished* and *Go Down, Moses*, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. The problem with scholars and critics not recognizing a short story cycle, is that literary works such as those mentioned above have been misunderstood, being viewed as short story collections with nothing tying the short stories together, enabling critics to look at individual stories as separate from the rest, or been mistaken for novels, resulting in critics excluding stories that did not fit in with the rest.

Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) is a book that has evaded generic categorization, due to its unusual form. It consists of 22 short stories, dealing with the everyday life of Mexican-Americans (Chicana/os), that are divided into three titled sections which respectively represent periods of a person's life: childhood, adolescence and adulthood; with the number of short stories in each section corresponding to the length of that part of life with seven short stories in the childhood section, two in the adolescence part, and fourteen in the final section representing adulthood. The short stories vary greatly in length, the shortest being only half a page, and the longest stories nearly thirty pages. Moreover, at times the short stories in this book even challenge the concept and genre of the short story, with short stories that at times nearly cross over from prose to poetry, and short stories which seem to have almost no plot. Many critics have commented upon *Woman Hollering Creek's* interesting form, but few have seen its form in relation to its content, choosing only a handful of stories and analyzing them in isolation, and even fewer have tried to place *Woman Hollering Creek* in a genre (a more extensive review other critics' discussion of *Woman Hollering Creek* and its genre is done in chapter two). Shelly Nicole Garcia problematizes this in her dissertation where she looks at genre innovation and transgression in relation to the writings of several Chicana authors including Sandra Cisneros. While Garcia mainly focuses

on *Woman Hollering Creek*'s predecessor *The House on Mango Street* (1984), she in her conclusion calls for an investigation of "how the play of form (not-quite novel made up of not-quite short stories) in *Mango Street* compares with Cisneros's collection of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek and other Stories* or her quasi-novel *Caramelo*"(265-6).

What Garcia calls for is part of the task which I set out to do in this thesis; seeing *Woman Hollering Creek*'s content in relation to its form. More specifically I will argue that *Woman Hollering Creek* is a short story cycle; and show the possibilities that the short story cycle provides as a genre with its characteristic structure of openness and lack of coherence. I will venture to illustrate that while *Woman Hollering Creek* is a quite open short story cycle with no final resolution. Nevertheless it is still a short story cycle with unifying traits. One of the major points of unification in this specific cycle is that all the characters are trying to navigate the gap, or borderlands if you will, between U.S. and Mexican culture in their pursuit of their Chicana/o identity. The struggles that the characters face are varied many, but there are a few that are reoccurring and that many of the characters have in common: their relationship to religion, the navigation of gender and gender roles, and discovery and understanding of one's sexuality. All these themes are important elements of a person's identity, and they all become more challenging to navigate when the navigation has to happen with one foot on each side of the Mexican-U.S. border. It is in this challenging environment that the openness and disjunction of the short story cycle really become invaluable qualities: They create the openness needed to navigate all these themes of identity in different ways throughout the short stories, while at the same time telling *the* story of the struggle for a Chicana/o identity.

To do this I will first provide a brief introduction to the importance of genre and to the concepts of Chicana/o and mestiza identity, followed by a more extensive look at the theoretic grounding for the short story cycle genre, and a critical review looking at what other scholars have said about *Woman Hollering Creek* in relation form and genre. Then in chapter three I will venture to establish that *Woman Hollering Creek* is a short story cycle by looking at its formal qualities in relation to short story cycle theory. Lastly in order to demonstrate how the short story cycle is the ideal genre to explore the complex problems of identity and belonging due to its multiplicity in form, and lack of formal restraints, I will do a thematic analysis of *Woman Hollering Creek* focusing on the themes mentioned above.

2 Theory and background

In this chapter I will discuss the relevance of genre, and the importance of discussing it, followed by a short review of *Woman Hollering Creek's* genre definition (or in many cases lack of definition) by other critics. Then I will provide a closer inspection of the short story cycle, the genre which this thesis argues that *Woman Hollering Creek* belongs to. Finally, I will give a brief introduction to idea of Chicana and mestiza identity, as I argue that the short story cycle is the ultimate genre for expressing this identity.

2.1 Why Genre Matters

Genre is one of the first things one is faced with in literature; it is a system by which bookstores and libraries sort their books, and we are taught in school the textual markers that can help us devise whether a text is a poem, a short story or a novel, and these markers tell us how “to read for generic associations to meet [our] expectations” (Whitlam 250). Thus, genre gives us a framework of categories, with each category containing markers that set it apart from others, and also gives us instruction as to how to approach these when reading. In his essay “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” Hans Robert Jauss famously devised the phrase “the horizon of expectation”, stating that “[t]he coherence of literature as an event is primarily mediated in the horizon of expectations of the literary experience of contemporary and later readers, critics, and authors” (Jauss 1409). This means that when approaching a work of literature we as readers and critics set out with a “horizon of expectation” that has to be mediated in order to achieve coherence. Genre sets up such a horizon of expectation which a reader or critic takes with her to the reading of a literary work. However, genres are not discrete; they blend into on another and interact with one another, and relationships between genres are established by texts (Whitla 252). This interaction between genres is often used by authors in new an experimental ways, resulting in new variations, and new understandings of genre. Rolf Lundén, a central scholar in short story cycle theory, explains that there are some problems with generic categorization as “over time certain forms of literature with strong closural force [like the novel,] have come to be preferred – even though exceptions have always existed – and, ... that once genres have been established, the tendency is to categorize texts within such constructed generic boundaries, even if the specific text resists such categorization” (55). This means that we as critics sometimes get too focused on a genre, and force texts to fit into generic categories where they

might not belong, and as Lundén states, this has especially been the case for genres that challenge our understanding of what genres are. Thus, knowledge of genre, and generic features becomes invaluable tools in literary analysis, as they give the critic the vocabulary that is needed to articulate what is being read and to keep up with the works of art created by the authors. Knowledge of genre can also give the necessary generic awareness which ensures that a critic does not force a genre upon a literary work that resists this categorization.

2.2 The Short Story Cycle

The short story cycle is a literary genre that exists somewhere between the short story and the novel. The term short story cycle was first coined by Forrest Ingram, who defines it “*as a book of stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts*” (Ingram 19 emphasis his). Thus, a short story cycle according to Ingram is a book where the smallest units are independent short stories, which are linked together by the author in a way that creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and the short stories become interdependent. Robert Luscher’s definition is quite similar. However, he further develops the explanation of what is meant by pattern: “The short-story cycle is a volume of short fiction collected and organized into an aesthetic whole by its author so that the reader successively realizes an underlying coherence and thematic unity through continually modified perceptions of pattern and theme” (Luscher “The American” 358). Thematic unity and coherence, more precisely “coherence among simultaneously independent and interdependent constituent parts” (Luscher, “The American” 358), is what sets it apart from a mere miscellany short story collection and other short fiction. Therefore, by categorizing a book as a short story cycle, one creates an expectation for the reader that there is a pattern, there is coherence, and there are overarching themes, which might be missed or ignored if the expectation of coherence does not exist.

While agreeing with Ingram that the short story composite¹ expresses the “tension between the one and the many” (Ingram 19), in his book *The United Stories of America*, Rolf Lundén criticizes Ingram’s “concern [...] with establishing a pattern linking the stories into a unified whole” (20). Lundén argues that in his analysis, Ingram’s concern with finding a

¹ Short story composite is Lundén's preferred term for what Ingram calls short story cycle.

pattern that can make the cycle or composite into a whole leads Ingram to focus much more on the unifying elements of the cycle/composite than the disruptive ones (20). The result is that “[r]ather than pointing to the *tension* between ‘the one and the many,’ [Ingram] makes it his concern to defuse that tension in order to establish, if possible, the literary work as a seamless whole” (20-1). I agree with Lundén in that you cannot force the short story cycle into a seamless whole, because while it is important to “elevate” the short story cycle as more than a random collection, it is also important not to take the short story cycle too far into the realm of cohesion (too far in this case being calling the short story cycle a composite novel rather than a short story cycle). Labels such as short story novel and composite novel create a problematic expectation of coherence that the short story cycle, with its independent stories, ultimately, will fail to satisfy (Luscher, “The American” 359). If the reader expects the “causal and temporal framework of a continuous and complete narrative” (Luscher, “The American” 357) that the novel usually has, a reading of a short story cycle will likely dismiss anything in the text that falls outside the framework and will probably miss the defining element of tension between the one and the many. James Nagel claims that the short story cycle “is a convention that needs to be recognized and understood as not simply ancillary to the more significant ‘novel’ but as integral to literary history, with an ancient origin and a set of narrational and structural principles quite distinct from other fictional modes” (10).

An interesting trait that the short story cycle has which also sets it apart from both the short story collection and the novel, that it invites co-creation from the reader. This co-creation happens when the reader tries to unify the text, by looking for patterns of cohesion by way of retrospective patterning. These patterns become visible as one progresses through the book, and the separate stories accumulate meaning that goes beyond the boundaries of the individual stories, affecting the previous and subsequent ones. However, retrospective patterning is not a unique generic feature of the short story cycle, and the short story cycle itself does not make it easy for the reader or the critic to find patterns, because it sets itself against complete unification. Therefore, Lundén argues “that the *degree* of continuous retrospective patterning is one of several generic features of the short story composite” (emphasis his, 66), meaning that the degree of co-creation, and the number of patterns that fit, will vary from cycle to cycle. Lundén has borrowed the term retrospective patterning from Barbara Herrnsteinn Smith which she describes as a sort of hypothesis of what will happen next in a poem as the reader creates a pattern backward in an effort to predict what will happen (212). So when Lundén talks about the degree of retrospective patterning, it means

that it will vary to which extent a given short story cycle allows for the reader to create a pattern. Thus, a more closed cycle will allow for a higher degree of retrospective patterning than a cycle which is very open.

There are several different terms vying for critical ascendancy when discussing what I in this thesis will refer to as “short story cycle”. Luscher argues that the three main terms are short story sequence, short story cycle, and short story composite which each emphasize one essential feature of the genre: composite “the form’s collage-like structure”; sequence “the volume’s progressive unfolding”; and cycle “draws attention to the recurrence of pattern” (“The American” 359). Susan Garland Mann suggests a thematic systematization. She distinguishes among two groups of cycles: the maturation of a single protagonist or that of the “composite” protagonist, and one expressing the theme of fragmentation of life and human isolation (7-14). Meanwhile, Rolf Lundén organizes the different cycles “on a scale from closure to openness, the four substructures that emerge are the *cycle*, the *sequence*, the *cluster*, and the *novella*” (Lundén 37), where the cycle is the least closed, and the novella the most, but as an overarching term he uses short story composite. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris on the other hand, prefer the term composite novel (2), explaining that “[c]omposite novel emphasizes the integrity of the whole, while *short story cycle* emphasizes the integrity of the parts” (Dunn and Morris 5, emphasis theirs). Furthermore, they problematize the term “cycle” as

a ‘cycle’ in anyone’s definition implies cyclical motion, a circular path, a return to the beginning, all of which preclude linear development. Thus the term *short story cycle* itself is doubly problematic: it not only implies inferior status in generic hierarchy, but also prescribes or at least suggests generic limitations. (Dunn and Morris 5)

I find their use of novel problematic, especially since part of their reasoning behind their choice is based in the novel’s place above the short story in the generic hierarchy. Furthermore, as I discussed previously, the horizon of expectation greatly impacts a reading, and by using the term “novel” they create a very specific expectation of generic markers that the short story cycle may not meet. Additionally, they refrain from using “cycle,” as they argue it alludes to linearity and a return to the beginning. I find this argument somewhat contradictory, as the novel as a genre greatly connotes both linearity and closure. James Nagel supports my belief, as he states that “[t]he lack of understanding of the short story cycle throughout the profession of literary study may result from its subordination into the concept

of 'novel,' the implicit assumption being that the novel is the highest form of expression in fiction, and the attribution of 'novel' to a work of fiction is thus perceived as a compliment" (15). Therefore, I believe, as Nagel also does, referring to the short story cycle as a composite novel actually does the genre a disservice. I will use the term "short story cycle," since, despite the fact that "cycle" traditionally is connected with closedness, I believe the notion of cycle and circularity is a benefit, as it invites the reader to return to the book, reading it several times to get an even deeper understanding of the work.

2.3 Chicana: The Mestiza Identity

The term "Chicana" refers to someone of a mixed Spanish, Indian, and Anglo decent, and generally describes someone of this mixed ethnicity living in the United States. Deborah L. Madsen points out that "[i]t is not 'Mexicanness' that the term 'Chicano' describes, but precisely the mix of Mexican, native (Aztec, Mayan), and European cultural heritage that comprises the Chicano as mestizo, as a person of mixed cultural ancestry" (Madsen, "Understanding" 6-7). In the Chicano/a culture, the male is often viewed as masculine, active, and aggressive, as opposed to the woman who is feminine, passive, and the recipient of male aggression (Madsen, "Understanding" 8). According to Gloria Anzaldúa, Chicanas claim three mothers: "*La gente Chicana tiene tres madres*. All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada (Malinche)*, the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two" (52). These three feminine archetypes are reoccurring themes in Chicana writing, as some claim that they "haunt the sexual and maternal identities of contemporary Mexican and Chicana women" (Wyatt 244). These three mothers are central elements throughout *Woman Hollering Creek* as well, and several of the characters face the impossible task of navigating these very limiting and finite feminine archetypes.

In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which since its publication in 1987 has become a central piece in Chicana feminist writing, Gloria Anzaldúa expands and reflects upon what and who this "new *mestiza*" is, and what challenges she faces. Anzaldúa writes that

[i]n a constant state of mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois,

and a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned [sic] mother listen to?

(*Borderlands* 100)

According to Anzaldúa, the *mestiza* is torn between cultures, and is continually having to choose between languages and cultural and spiritual values, which might at times be mutually exclusive, and might also change according to situation and place. What may be expected by one's Mexican relatives might become ostracizing within U.S. society. But the *mestiza* becomes conditioned to this "constant state of mental nepantlism", says Anzaldúa:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. 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 (*Borderlands* 101)

The complexity of the *mestiza* identity that Anzaldúa describes here is reminiscent of that of the short story cycle. Just as the *mestiza* juggles cultures and plural personalities, the short story cycle balances independent parts, thus also operating in a "pluralistic mode". Moreover, similarly to Anzaldúa's argument that nothing is thrust out of the *mestiza* identity, "nothing rejected", the short story cycle also contains short stories that might seem out of place to the reader, setting up a tension within itself. Finally, both the *mestiza* and the short story cycle sustain contradictions, and turns it into something else: the *mestiza* a distinct identity existing betwixt and between; the short story cycle a narrative that is greater than the sum of its parts.

2.4 *Woman Hollering Creek*: a Genre Review

There is no real consensus as to what genre *Woman Hollering Creek* belongs to, and there is a wide variety of terms circulating, among which many are genre non-specific (such as "text", "story", or "collection of stories"). Exactly why *Woman Hollering Creek* seems to have evaded genre placement by critics is not completely clear, but I will argue that both its unique form and its title may have played a role in it resisting categorization by previous critics.

When *Woman Hollering Creek* was first published, its title was suffixed with the phrase “and other stories”, a phrase which Susan Garland Mann in her book *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* points out as traditionally being the marker of a collection of short stories rather than a cycle, when put after the title (which usually was taken from one of the short stories in the collection) (14). The reason for the phrase “and other stories” having this effect is according to Mann that “[t]itles of collections containing the words ‘and other stories’ obviously make no claims for unity among their stories” (14). The title of a literary work is very important, as it is one of the first generic features that the reader is faced with, thus greatly contributing to the reader’s horizon of expectation. Mann illustrates this importance with the anecdotal example of Faulkner’s reaction to his publisher adding “and other stories” to the title of *Go Down, Moses*:

William Faulkner became furious when Random House took the initiative to change the title of *Go Down, Moses* to *Go Down, Moses And Other Stories*. When the book was reissued in 1949, Faulkner made sure that the subtitle (‘And Other Stories’) was permanently deleted. (14)

In later editions of *Woman Hollering Creek*, “and other stories” was removed. I haven’t been able to find when or why this happened, but one can assume that Cisneros shares some of the same awareness of the title’s effect as Faulkner did, and maybe she had the same reason for her choice of title change. The removal of this phrase certainly seems to have had some effect on critics’ genre classification of this book.

Woman Hollering Creek is a study in experimental and skillful use of form, with short stories pushing the boundaries of what we usually conceive as short stories, at times almost crossing the border of prose and poetry. Many of the critics I have read do remark upon its unique form. However, few venture to connect form and genre in their analysis. As mentioned previously, some critics choose to use genre neutral terminology in their analysis such as “text”, “stories”, “collection”, or simply refer to the Title of the short story they are analyzing (Bost 514; Carbonell 65; Doyle 55; Fitts 11; Madsen, *Understanding* 110; Mullen 3, 6; Wyatt 244), while others use more genre specific terminology like short story, short stories, and short story collection (Garcia 265-6, Rojas 136). There are critics who despite withholding genre specific terminology, remark upon the unique form of *Woman Hollering Creek*. In her article “The Contrapuntal Geographies of *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*”, Mary Pat Brady uses Ross Chambers’ expression “loiterature” as a comparison to the stories in

Woman Hollering Creek, as she claims the both “bring ‘the everyday’ into sharp focus” (119-120). Chambers defines loiterature as a

genre in which, in opposition to dominant forms of narrative, relies on techniques of digression, interruption, deferral and episodicity ... to make observations of modern life that are unsystematic, even disordered, and are usually oriented toward the everyday, the ordinary and the trivial. (Chambers 207)

While loiterature is a good expression when describing Cisneros’s style of writing, and also some of the settings and themes in the different stories, it does not focus on either short stories, or the structuring of the short stories and how they work together. However, Brady does, as she in her article is “focusing ... on how the collection’s narrative techniques call into question various special representations” (119), and how the “stories ... shrewdly exploit complex relationships between reader, narrative voice, and spatial gesture” (120). Brady does look at how the collection works as a whole, and how the stories (as she calls them) work together intertextually, but she does not attribute or connect these features to genre. Brady further remarks upon how some of Cisneros’s short stories in the cycle challenge the concept of short stories. While she does not actually use the term “short story”, the observations concerning the effect of these short stories are astute, and very accurate in my opinion: “Without the soothing structure of a beginning, middle, or end, without a goal to tug a reader through plot, these brief stories emphasize through contrast the predictability of conventional narrative” (120).

A critic who does in fact mention genre in her article is Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, and she was also the only critic I found who referred to a copy of *Woman Hollering Creek* without “and other stories”. In her essay “*Gritos desde la Frontera: Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Postmodernism*”, Mermann-Jozwiak analyzes “Little Miracles, Kept Promises” and views it as an example of experimentation with the short story genre (108-9). Moreover, she does mention the short story cycle, and also notes that “imagistic episodic vignettes have become the hallmark of Cisneros’s Fiction” (109). However, she does not connect what she calls Cisneros’ hallmark with the short story cycle, nor does she suggest it as a proposed genre for *Woman Hollering Creek*, but she uses the short story cycle as an example of how the short story is suited to experimentation in its subject matter and style, due to the short story being a minor genre with a lesser status (108-9). Mermann-Jozwiak concludes by claiming that “Little

Miracles, Kept Promises” is a “blending of genres, family saga and telenova [sic], and short story”, and leaves the question of *Woman Hollering Creek*’s genre unanswered.

In her essay “Cisneros’s ‘Terrible’ Women: Recuperating the Erotic as a Feminist Source in ‘Never Marry a Mexican’ and ‘Eyes of Zapata’”, Maythee Rojas approaches *Woman Hollering Creek* as a short story collection (136) as she analyzes and compares the protagonists of the short stories “Never Marry a Mexican” and “Eyes of Zapata”. Rojas does not comment upon genre or the relationship between form and content, but she does describe the effect of having the two short stories she is analyzing “placed side by side” and how the stories of the protagonists “effectively expose the fully realized position of women caught within a system of prescribed sexual and racial roles and their corresponding resistance to these impositions”, and notes that they “tell the fragmented yet interconnected narratives of two generations of mistresses”(138). Whether Rojas’s reference to the side by side placement is in way of a metaphor, or if she refers to the short stories being side by side in the book (they are only separated by the one page short story “Bread”), her observation that the two short stories tell a fragmented yet interconnected narrative is one that I later in this thesis will argue is not isolated to these two short stories only, but is something that is happening throughout the book. I will also argue that this can be attributed to genre, as fragmentation and interconnection are two significant genre traits in the short story cycle.

In his article “‘What is Called Heaven’: Identity in Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*” Jeff Thomson uses the terminology “stories” (416) and “collection” (415). In fact, Thomson refers to *Woman Hollering Creek* as Cisneros’s “second” collection (415), and *The House on Mango Street* being Cisneros’s first collection (416). Thomson has the edition of *Woman Hollering Creek* with the “and other stories” attached to the title, which might be part of the reason why he prefers to call it a collection. On the other hand, when commenting on the structure of the book (with its three sections which correspond to childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) Thomson notes that “[e]ach of the earlier pieces is independent of the others, yet as whole sections they define specific areas of adversity – specifically feminine adversity” (416), and further adds that the “vignettes that Cisneros offers are not supposed to be read as isolated incidents, but rather emblematic of a social structure” (418). These intertextual elements that Thomson point out, as I will discuss more in depth in the next section, are one of the key elements of the short story cycle as a genre: it is comprised of independent short stories that work together in creating something greater than

the sum of its parts. Thus, like several of the other critics, Thomson does not attribute the unique formal features of Cisneros's work which he remarks upon to genre.

While few critics, as shown above, focus much on genre, there are some who do, and have placed *Woman Hollering Creek* in the genre of the bildungsroman. In her master thesis, Marita Langelo proposes a completely new genre for *Woman Hollering Creek*: the "bildungscomposite". The genre that Langelo has dubbed bildungscomposite is a cross between the bildungsroman and the short story composite (another name for the genre I refer to as short story cycle). Langelo proposes that "[t]he division of the book into the three sections – which clearly represent childhood, adolescence, and adulthood – suggests *Bildung* as the organizing [sic] principle" (Langelo 6), but if one intends to read it as a short story cycle/composite, "we must look beyond the tripartite division of the *Bildungs* process since the composite structure ... does not stay within these divides" (Langelo 6). Indeed, the structure of the book is divided into three parts that represent childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. However, I do not agree that this structure necessarily imply bildung. It may just be that the structure is meant to represent three different views on being Chicana/o, organized chronologically by age. Furthermore, if one, as Langelo states, have to look beyond this structure in order to read it as a cycle or composite, the application of the bildungs-genre to the cycle/composite seems redundant. By alluding to the genre of bildungsroman in the term "bildungscomposite", I believe creates a reading which is prone to too much coherence in the pursuit of bildung, resulting in the omitting of what I will argue are central to *Woman Hollering Creek* and other short story cycles, namely the tension between the one and the many, and its resistance to resolution and cohesion.

3 *Woman Hollering Creek* and the Short Story Cycle

In this chapter the goal is to examine whether *Woman Hollering Creek* is in fact a short story cycle (as is argued in this thesis), or just a collection of short stories by looking at the elements in the book that contribute to cohesion and unification, but also those that resist and create openness and disjunction. The objective of this is to devise an understanding of the book that invites a reading where none of the stories are ignored, excluded, or forced to fit in due to misguided expectations or lack of generic understanding. While this might seem quite straightforward, it is impossible to draw absolute boundaries between genres, and “therefore only generic tendencies can be outlined” (Lundén 8). For a genre such as the short story cycle, which exists in the vast landscape between the completely fragmented and open short story collection and the coherent, closed novel, these generic tendencies are both multiple and varied, containing narrative elements of both fragmentation and coherence. As mentioned in chapter 2, there is no consensus as to which genre *Woman Hollering Creek* belongs in, so to help my examination I will look at analysis done on other short story cycles that are similar to *Woman Hollering Creek*. Thus, by examining some of the narrative elements in the context of their contribution to closure and openness of the work, as well as comparing *Woman Hollering Creek* to similar works which have been placed in the short story cycle genre, it will become clear whether *Woman Hollering Creek* is “too open” to be considered as something more than a collection.

When analyzing a short story cycle, it is easy to become too eager in wanting everything to fit into a nice and tidy pattern. Nevertheless, it is important that we as critics do not fall for this temptation, as it distracts us from some of the most important features of the short story cycle, namely its fragmentation and openness. According to Lundén, “unity, coherence, and closure have been privileged at the expense of discontinuity, fragmentation and openness” (8). Rather than just looking at what fits into a pattern of coherence, Lundén believes that what is important is to look at the tension between the closural and anti-closural forces in the text (59-60). This tension is constructed from an intricate combination of centripetal and centrifugal narrative forces (Lundén 60) that simultaneously pull the cycle together and apart.

The structure of the *Woman Hollering Creek* is probably its most prominent unifying feature. The book is divided into three sections: The first is titled “My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn”; the second “One Holy Night”; and the third “There Was a Man, There

Was a Woman”); and all the sections are named after a story within each respective section. The first section contain seven stories, the middle, two, and the last, thirteen. These three sections correspond to three parts of life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Thus, the overall structure of the cycle is relatively closed (not in the sense that it creates a resolution of the work, but that it creates a very organized, and obvious structure for the relationship among the stories), with an overarching theme of aging and maturation following a linear and chronological development. This main structure is reminiscent of the structure of the classic, plot-driven novel that has a distinct beginning, middle and end, and where the plot achieves an absolute resolution. However, the stories contained in the three subsequent parts do not provide the satisfaction of a final resolutions. Moreover, there is not a common narrator or protagonist in the stories (like there is in *The House on Mango Street*), therefore the reader will never get the satisfaction of knowing the “full story” of all the different characters’ destinies. This overall closed structure of *Woman Hollering Creek*, then, becomes juxtaposed with all the independent narratives it contains. Hence, a tension is created between this carefully crafted developmental structure, which acts as a centripetal force, telling the reader that all the stories belong together in some way, and all the independent short stories with different narrators and protagonists, which create a centrifugal force that breaks up the structure. Lundén notes exactly this tension between openness and closure as specific to the short story cycle (60), stating that “[t]o generalize, one may claim that the composite² is an open work consisting of closed stories. [...] Simultaneously, the consecutiveness between stories, however tangential, forge a sense of a whole. The individual stories thus come to possess a double function, a coexistence as independent entities and as partially integrated segments of a totality” (60). In a footnote regarding the structure of *Woman Hollering Creek* Jeff Thomson comments that “Cisneros sets up a very traditional paradigm here (a maturing, evolving consciousness is the model for Joyce’s *Dubliners*), yet her focus is distinct: the marginalized position of an individual and a culture outside the mainstream” (418). As noted previously, Thomson does not suggest any specific genre for *Woman Hollering Creek*, but his observation that Cisneros’s paradigm is similar to that of Joyce’s *Dubliners* is very interesting, as *Dubliners* is widely recognized as a short story cycle among scholars of the genre (Dunn and Morris 14; Ingram 26; Kennedy vii; Lundén 87; Mann 25). *Woman Hollering Creek*, then, can be described as an open work, with a closed structure created by

² Short story composite is Lundén's preferred term for the genre

the three sections, containing closed stories that have the role of independent entities partially integrated into their respective sections, as well as simultaneously contributing to the whole of the section, and the totality of the work. Or to use Thomson's terminology: all the short stories build an evolving consciousness, that all together works to illustrate the "marginalized position of an individual and a culture outside the mainstream".

Except for the structure of *Woman Hollering Creek*, there are not many blatantly obvious features that reveal patterns, or establish an overwhelming sense of coherence, and even the closed overall structure is challenged at times. For instance, almost all the stories are set in the same time; in the sense that all the stories in section one seem to be narrated by children living in the same time, the stories in section two seem to be narrated by characters that were children in the same time period as the narrators in section one, which is also the case for most of the stories in section three, that seem to be narrated by characters that could have been adolescents in the same time as the narrators in section two. There is one exception to this, the short story "Eyes of Zapata," which figures in the third section, titled, "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman". This short story is set in the time of the Mexican Revolution in the beginning of the 20th century, while as an example the story "Barbie-Q" in the first section, "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn", is set around 1965, creating a temporal gap of about 50 years. Furthermore, "Eyes of Zapata" is, as mentioned, in the third and final part of the book, and "Barbie-Q" in the first, thus the time of the two stories works against the chronological development of the overall structure of the book, and creates a somewhat confusing and challenging temporal gap in the chronology of the structure that challenges readers in their task of creating a retrospective pattern within the short story cycle.

However, there are examples of stories that clearly refer to the preceding ones, which very much invites the reader to create a pattern of connectedness between the stories. A great example of two stories that are connected in a high degree is "Tin Tan Tan" and "Bien Pretty," the second-to-last and last stories in the third and final section of the cycle, "There Was a Man There Was a Woman". "Tin Tan Tan" is a poem-like story consisting of six verses or paragraphs, where the first letter of each verse is in capital and bold lettering, and all the letters together spell the name "LUPITA." The poem is a love poem, or rather a poem about love lost. Interestingly, the narrator's name in "Bien Pretty" is Lupe, and she tells the story of how she became romantically involved with the man who exterminated the roaches in the house she was living. His name was "Flavio Munguía," and "[h]e wrote poems and signed them 'Rogelio Velasco'" (138). Flavio and Lupe's relationship fails, and Lupe burns "all of

Flavio's letters and poems and photos and cards and all the sketches and studies [she]'d ever done of him" (160) except one poem, the last poem that Flavio gave Lupe before he left. She tells the reader that the poem was "[p]retty in Spanish. But you'll have to take my word for it. In English it just sounds goofy" (161). In addition to the fact that the verses in "Tin Tan Tan" spell out the name of the protagonist in "Bien Pretty", the two stories share the theme of lost love. Furthermore, the narrator of "Tin Tan Tan" writes about himself in third person: "Return my life to me, and end this absurd pain. If not, Rogelio Velasco will have loved in vain" (135), and "But none will love you so honorably and true as the way Rogelio Velasco Loved you." So, although the poem is signed "Tan TÁN" (136) and not Rogelio Velasco, it is quite clear that the poem is written by Rogelio Velasco. Moreover, there is evidence that the poet shares the same occupation as Flavio Munguía, and met his soon-to-be lost love in the same way that Lupe met Flavio in "Bien Pretty": "Dressed in my uniform and carrying the tools of my trade, without knowing destiny waited for me, I knocked. [...] Perhaps I can exterminate the pests of doubt that infests your house" (136). The unambiguousness of shared names, theme, way of meeting, and occupation makes it quite clear that the poem preceding "Bien Pretty" is the "goofy" English version of the poem that Lupe keeps. Thus, the cycle, in my view, very much invites the reader to, in this case, implement a high degree of retrospective patterning, and it would be very hard for any critic to argue that this is a pattern that is forced onto these two stories.

Though it might not be as obvious as the structure, nor as literal as the connection between "Bien Pretty" and "Tin Tan Tan", there is a reoccurring and overarching theme of identity navigation and development. This is seen when characters confront, are trapped by, or reinvent established notions regarding forms of identity such as gender, religion and sexuality. These three themes; gender, religion, and sexuality, manifest themselves in the three feminine archetypes that Anzaldúa called the mothers of Chicanas: La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona. These three archetypes in some sense become reoccurring characters in this short story cycle, with protagonists having to face them either when they try to escape (both successfully and unsuccessfully) one of these archetypes, or are being forced into one of them by their surroundings. Jeff Thomson echoes this, however without mentioning the feminine archetypes explicitly, when he claims that "Cisneros moves through a paradigm of feminine life ... exploring avenues of possible escape, possible identity" (418). An example of the way these feminine archetypes figure in the sort story cycle can be seen in the short story "One Holy Night", where the protagonist resists the role

of la Malinche that society tries to force upon her by refusing to feel shame when she falls pregnant out of wedlock, and in “Never Marry a Mexican” the protagonist upholds the archetype of la Malinche when she seduces a former lover’s son to punish him for staying with his wife, thus upholding the notion of Malinche as a traitor to her own. According to Alexandra Fitts, Cisneros in turn also tackles La Llorona in the short story “Woman Hollering Creek”, and Guadalupe in “Little Miracles, Kept Promises.” Fitts claims that Cisneros does not “merely [redeem] these figures as powerful female icons” but that she instead “modernizes and adds nuance to their legends and their legacies” (11). This exploration of these feminine archetypes becomes a feature that saturates the short story cycle and pulls it together, as they continually occur in different capacities in different stories.

When trying to establish the genre of *Woman Hollering Creek*, which has so little genre related critique and scholarly work done on it, it is natural to compare it to similar works. As I have already shown, *Woman Hollering Creek* has been compared to Joyce’s short story cycle *Dubliners*, but there is a short story cycle that is even more closely related to *Woman Hollering Creek*: Cisneros’s own *The House on Mango Street*. James Nagel analyzes *The House on Mango Street* as a short story cycle in his book *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, claiming that “[w]ithin the legacy of the short-story cycle, there are several unifying principles that link the individual stories of *The House on Mango Street* so that they enrich one another” (Nagel 107). Deborah L. Madsen finds that “[t]he stories collected in *Woman Hollering Creek* are organized according to a similar associative logic [to that of *The House on Mango Street*]” (*Understanding* 110), which prompts a comparison of the two. When listing the unifying principles of *The House on Mango Street*, Nagel starts off with how the short story cycle is narrated:

a continuing, first-person narrative voice, approximating the language of a child but capable of selecting meaningful sentences and describing them in poetic language that resonates humanistically, gradually sharpening in perception, deepening in layers of sensibility, conveying through painful experiences, both compassion and understanding. (Nagel 107)

This single first-person voice cannot be found in *Woman Hollering Creek*, but the use of an approximation of child language that “gradually sharpen(s) in perception” that Nagel finds in *The House on Mango Street* is a narrative technique that Cisneros also applies in *Woman Hollering Creek*. There is a gradual increasing sophistication of the language throughout

Woman Hollering Creek, where the sentences in the childhood-section are long and rambling, like a child talking excitedly without taking a breath, but at the same time cleverly descriptive. This excerpt is taken from a paragraph in the very first story of the first section with the same title, “My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn”:

I’m sitting in the sun even though it’s the hottest part of the day, the part that makes the street dizzy, when the heat makes a little hat on the top of your head and bakes the dust and weed grass and sweat up good, all steamy and smelling like sweet corn. (4)

The narrative voice in *Woman Hollering Creek* continues to develop into adulthood, as opposed to the narrative voice of *Esperanza*, which Nagel as Nagel says “fits dramatically into the mythic tradition of the adolescent narrator” (127), because *The House on Mango Street* not following *Esperanza* into adulthood.

In *The House on Mango Street*, the 44 stories follow one another without being divided into title sections as in *Woman Hollering Creek*. However, there are still similarities, as Nagel observes that “[t]he stories are arranged chronologically, thus revealing *Esperanza*’s progressive growth, disillusionment, and determination to escape Mango Street to make a better life for herself through her writing” (107). This is similar to the organization of stories in *Woman Hollering Creek*, which are also organized chronologically, showing progressive growth (just through different characters), and disillusionment, like when *Ixchel* loses her virginity in the short story “One Holy Night” and the mythical spell of sexuality is broken. Similarly, in both books there can be found “thematic groupings of stories, recurring issues of the family and the barrio, religion, sexual maturity, and marriage” (Nagel 126), as I will show in the next chapter, where I do a thematic analysis of a selection of short stories from *Woman Hollering Creek*. So while both of *Cisneros*’s cycles exhibit a satisfying thematic pattern, there is one factor that truly separates them and that is the “tightly unified narrative strategy, a narrow focus on *Esperanza* and her immediate family and friends, a consistent voice and tone” (Nagel 126) that is found in *The House on Mango Street*. In *Woman Hollering Creek*, there is a different narrator in every short story, and there is not a set group of characters that take turns as narrators and protagonists. The lack of this unifying voice does contribute to a certain amount of disjointedness amongst the stories. However, I believe that part of this disjointedness is counteracted by the explicitly “sorted” and systemized chronological and developmental structure of *Woman Hollering Creek*, which contributes to the cohesion and connectedness of the stories, to a degree that might not be equivalent to that of a single

narrator, but is certainly similar. The collection gives the reader some security through its organization, and at the same time freedom for the author, as she is able to utilize a vaster and more diverse scope of characters that can problematize and illustrate more themes and situations than one single narrator.

Despite not having a unifying narrative voice like its closest “relation” *The House on Mango Street*, it is clear that *Woman Hollering Creek* belongs in the short story cycle genre as well. Its thoroughly crafted developmental structure of three parts provides a secure frame for all 22 short stories, and creates a stable temporal backdrop for the exploration of themes such as religion, gender and sexuality, and sexual maturation. Furthermore, the three feminine archetypes Virgin de Guadalupe, la Llorona, and la Malinche function as personifications of these themes, and also serve as reoccurring, symbolic characters that take on new nuances that go beyond the legends that they are based on as different protagonists face them. However, *Woman Hollering Creek* is not a closed short story cycle, in the sense that it does not provide a satisfactory resolution of conflicts at the end, where all the feminine archetypes would be redeemed or reinvented, and all the protagonists go through a rite of passage or reinvent their identities. Rather, it provides a multiplicity of possible outcomes and destinies for marginalized individuals in a marginalized culture existing in the borderlands of Mexico and the U.S.

4 Analysis

In this chapter I will first analyze how the themes religion, navigation of gender and gender roles, and discovery and understanding of one's sexuality are portrayed throughout the short story cycle within its three consecutive parts. I will do this through a selection of five short stories: "Mericans," "Tepeyac," "On Holy Night," "Remember the Alamo," and "Never Marry a Mexican." I have chosen to analyze them in the order they occur in *Woman Hollering Creek*, as the organization of the stories into childhood, adolescence and adulthood ensues that the short stories become increasingly more complex, both in language and theme; also just like as you accumulate experience and knowledge throughout your life, the short stories accumulate meaning from the previous ones. The problem with this is that just as the short stories in the short story cycle affect each other, and successively accumulate meaning for the reader, so does my analysis become successive. Thus, after the analysis of the individual short stories, bypassing the successiveness of the short story cycle and my analysis I will look at them all together, in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the themes of identity portrayed beyond how they work in the individual short stories, thus contributing to the story of the struggle for a Chicana/o identity.

4.1 The Short Stories

4.1.1 "Mericans"

The first short story I will analyze is the second to last story in the first section of *Woman Hollering Creek*, titled "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn". This short story incorporates nearly all the themes I have previously mentioned, except that of sexuality, from a Chicana child's perspective. The title of the short story is "Mericans", and it takes place inside and on the plaza outside of the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is near the hill of Tepeyac in Mexico City. The story is narrated by a young girl named Micaela, who together with her younger brother Keeks and her older brother Junior, is forced to wait outside the church while the "awful grandmother" (17) is inside praying to the Virgin de Guadalupe, or as Micaela tells it: "the awful grandmother intercedes on [...] behalf" (17) of "the husband and the sons and the only daughter who never attends mass" (17). The awful grandmother is

praying for her entire family as she “knits the names of the dead and the living into one long prayer fringed with the grandchildren born in that barbaric country with its barbarian ways” (19). From this, one gathers that religion is a serious matter for the grandmother, and the responsibility of it is not taken lightly by the grandmother, all of which is observed by Micaela. On the other hand, Micaela herself does not seem to feel the pressure of this responsibility. For her, religion is just something that exists and plays a role in her everyday life, but not something she actively partakes in, or feels a responsibility to partake in.

Micaela is a passive observer of religion, rather than an active participant. Her passiveness becomes apparent when she watches the pilgrims and others coming to pay their respects to, or seek forgiveness from, the Virgin:

There are those walking to church on their knees. Some with fat rags tied around their legs and others with pillows, one to kneel on, and one to flop ahead. There are women with black shawls crossing and uncrossing themselves. There are armies of penitents carrying banners and flowered arches while musicians play tinny trumpets and tinny drums. (18)

Micaela just remarks upon what she sees in a factual manner, and she holds herself separate from the people she observes, not showing any emotion or reflection regarding what she sees. Even though at one point she does go inside the church to her grandmother, she still remains an observer. “The awful grandmother makes [her] kneel and fold [her] hands” (19), and rather than participating in prayer, Micaela’s attention is immediately drawn to the eyes of the saints, which if she stares long enough at, “move and wink at [her]” (19), and when Micaela gets tired of this, she counts “the awful grandmother’s mustache hairs while she prays” (19).

Micaela’s passivity in regards to religion becomes juxtaposed with the grandmother’s active participation. While religion is not something that Micaela feels a personal attachment to, the awful grandmother’s relationship to religion is indeed personal, to such a degree that just “[l]ike La Virgin de Guadalupe, the awful grandmother intercedes on [the family’s] behalf” (17). Here Micaela actually compares her grandmother to the Virgin, and in doing so states that the relationship the awful grandmother has with God is equal to that of La Virgin de Guadalupe. This comparison speaks to the reverence Michaela feels for her grandmother, and additionally it ascribes a degree of intimacy to this relationship between the grandmother and God. The nature of the grandmother’s relationship to God is further supported by another

family member in addition to Micaela. The grandmother prays on behalf of Uncle Baby, who says to the grandmother “*You go for me, Mamá – God Listens to you*” (17). Uncle Baby believes that his prayers will be more easily heard if they come from the grandmother, because God actually listens to her. Whether Uncle Baby truly believes this, or it is just a way of getting out of going to church, does not matter because either way it supports the fact that there is a belief throughout the family that is being upheld, which validates the intimacy of the grandmother’s relation to religion and God.

The fact that the grandmother is inside the church, and the children have to wait outside while she prays, further strengthens the juxtaposition of Micaela’s and the grandmother’s relationships with religion by adding another dimension to the passive/active and impersonal/personal roles that already characterize each of their relationships: topographically separating them also adds the roles of outsider and insider. The grandmother is literally inside the house of God, while the children are left outside. Micaela decides to go inside the church to her grandmother, but as discussed above, she does not imitate her grandmother’s behavior. This is what happens:

I put my weight one knee, then the other, and when they both grow fat as mattress of pins, I slap them each awake. *Micaela, you may wait outside with Alfreddito and Enrique.* The awful grandmother says it all in Spanish, which I understand when I’m paying attention. ‘What?’ I say, though it’s neither proper nor polite. ‘What’ which the awful grandmother hears as ‘¿*Güat?*’ But she only gives me a look and shoves me toward the door. (19)

Her grandmother throws Micaela out of the church, because Micaela’s behavior is wrong. She is slapping her legs, and talking in rude and improper English that the grandmother does not or will not understand. Therefore, the grandmother denies Micaela’s effort of becoming an insider and her efforts of trying to be less passive, and without signs of willingness to change it, upholds the separation between them.

There are two possible reasons for Micaela’s passiveness: it could be either because Micaela is simply too young to understand the concept of religion, or because she was born in what the grandmother calls “... that barbaric country with its barbarian ways” (19), e.g. the U.S., which does not have the same religious traditions as Mexico. In this case, I believe the reason is the latter rather than the former because while a Mexican child may not understand

the concept of religion, the grandmother denies Micaela's efforts on the grounds of where she is born. The grandmother refuses to speak in a way that Micaela understands, and she also believes that due to their birthplace, Micaela and her brothers are in need of prayers, just as much as "Uncle Old, sick from the worm, and Auntie Cuca, suffering from a life of troubles that left half her face crooked and the other half sad" (19).

While religion serves as a division between Micaela and her grandmother, it also serves as a division between Micaela and the tourist-couple. When Micaela exits the church, she sees that her brother Junior is talking to a man and a woman, and she immediately deduces that "They're not from here" (20) because "Ladies don't come to church dressed in pants. And everybody knows men aren't supposed to wear shorts" (20). Obviously not everybody knows that ladies cannot wear pants to church, or that men cannot wear shorts, and that is why they are wearing them. Thus, the "everybody" Micaela refers to does not include white Americans, and therefore by this knowledge of church etiquette Micaela is able to point them out as tourists and outsiders. On the other hand, the tourist-couple are not able to identify Micaela and her siblings as Americans, and the woman gives Junior some gum and asks him if she can take a photo of him in Spanish. (20) So when Junior asks his siblings in English "You want some gum?" (20), she exclaims "But you speak English!" and the short story ends with Junior answering "'Yeah ... we're Mericans'", and Micaela thinking "We're Mericans, we're Mericans, and inside the awful grandmother prays" (20). This scene perfectly highlights the Chicana/o paradox in a quite clever way. Micaela can immediately see that the couple are tourists and not from "here", and the tourist-couple believes that the children are from "here", but the children perceive themselves as American, and in fact they perceive themselves American to such a degree that they opt for the term "Merican", a caricature of the word American, which in modern society has red-neck and overtly patriotic connotations. And all the while, the grandmother is completely separate, in the church praying.

While religion and religiousness and the way it highlights cultural differences might be the main theme of this short story, there are also some aspects of religious tradition that illustrate gender expectations as well as cultural differences. As discussed above, the fact that the lady wore pants to church enabled Micaela to deduce that she was not Mexican, and by this it is evident that there is a specific expectation of women to dress in a feminine way in church, alluding to the fact that there is some connection between the expectations of female gender roles and religion. Furthermore, and even more explicitly, Micaela tells the reader that *Girl* is an insult that her brothers use: "'*Girl*. We can't play with a *girl*.' *Girl*. It's my

brothers' favorite insult now instead of 'sissy.' 'You *girl*,' they yell at each other. 'You throw the ball like a *girl*'" (18). "Girl" has equal meaning to the word "sissy" according to Micaela's brothers. By this, it becomes clear that "girl" equals "weak", making it clear that the being a girl has clear expectations of weakness, and this expectation arises already in childhood. We also see that this definition of the female gender role affects Micaela when she plays with her brother: "... I don't like being the Mud People. Something wants to come out of the corners of my eyes, but I don't let it. Crying is what *girls* do" (19). Micaela is forced to suppress her feelings because she does not want to affirm the weakness expected of her gender by her brothers. Thus, the role of the female becomes defined as early as childhood, and it also shows its effects. On the other hand, the grandmother yet again becomes a juxtaposition to her granddaughter because, in this religious role she has taken on, and the family has given her, she becomes the matriarch of the family, the one, strong female that is able to bear all the sorrows of all her family members, and she also takes on the caring responsibility to intervene on their behalf to ask for forgiveness. The strength that the awful grandmother shows becomes completely opposite of the weakness her grandsons associate with the term "*girl*." While the grandmother may not be a girl anymore, she shares the gender of her granddaughter Micaela, which proves that there are different roles that apply to the female gender, and that these roles may actually contradict each other.

In this short story, the theme of religion works as an enabler in defining the borderland that the Chicanas/os have to navigate, and it also illustrates the passivity usually attributed to women in Chicano/a culture. Micaela's relationship to religion highlights her separation from her grandmother, in addition to separating her from the American couple, perfectly illustrating the difficulty of being part of two completely different cultures. Furthermore, it also illustrates how Micaela is perceived by her Mexican grandmother, and the American couple: Not Mexican enough, and not American enough.

4.1.2 "Tepeyac"

"Tepeyac" is the short story following "Mericans", and is the last short story in the section titled "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn." As one can gather from the title, the story unfolds in the same place as the previous story, below the hill of Tepeyac and on the plaza outside "La Basílica de Nuestra Señora" (21). As opposed to its preceding story, "Tepeyac" is

narrated by an adult whose gender is unclear. Moreover, it has the quality of a memory: The narrator remembers her/himself and her/his grandfather walking home from working at the plaza in great detail, but close to the end of the short story the time moves to “years later” (23) and the present day of the narrator.

Religion plays a central role in this short story too, but not in the way of the characters’ religiousness. In this text, religion in the form of the religious monuments of Tepeyac and the Basilica that the narrator and his/her grandfather used to walk by on the way home from work become the backdrop of the life and living of the narrator and his/her grandfather:

I take Abuelito’s hand, fat and dimpled in the center like a valentine, and we walk past the basilica, where each Sunday Abuela lights the candles for the soul of Abuelito. Past the same spot where long ago Juan Diego brought down from the *cerro* the miracle that has drawn everyone, except my Abuelito, on their knees. (22)

The religious monuments become the locus of the narrator’s memory of his/her time with his/her Abuelito in the sense that she ties all the memories to this place. In fact, the whole short story brings to mind the mnemonic method called *loci*, also known as memory journey and mind palace technique, an imagining technique where one

memorizes the layout of some building, or the arrangement of shops on a street, or any geographical entity which is composed of a number of discrete loci. When desiring to remember a set of items the subject literally ‘walks’ through these loci and commits an item to each one by forming an image between the item and any distinguishing feature of that locus. Retrieval of items is achieved by ‘walking’ through the loci, allowing the latter to activate the desired items. (O’Keefe and Nadel 389)

The narrator has organized the things s/he wants to remember about Mexico and his/her grandparents through the memorization of the road from Abuelito’s shop to their home, which passes these religious monuments. As seen in the excerpt above, by remembering the walk past the basilica s/he also remembers that his/her abuelita was the one taking the religious “responsibility” in the family by lighting “candles for the soul of Abuelito” (Cisneros 22). S/he also remembers that Abuelito himself was not a God fearing man, because when they walk by the spot “where Juan Diego brought down ... the miracle” (22), s/he states that the miracle drew “everyone, except my Abuelito, on their knees” (22). Thus, the basilica and the

place of the miracle become a means to remember personal qualities and details about the narrator's grandparents.

Furthermore, through remembering this path they took home, s/he also remembers all the little details of the life and people surrounding the plaza and the road as they walk by. As the narrator walks past shops and stores, details of his/her daily life are described, and the sentence follows the length of the walk until they reach the house:

... down the avenue one block past the bright lights of the *sastería* of Señor Guzmán who is still at work at his sewing machine, past the candy store where I buy my milk-and-raisin gelatins, past La Providencia *tortillería* where every afternoon Luz María and I are sent for the basket of lunchtime tortillas, past the house of the widow Márquez whose husband died last winter of a tumor the size of her little white fist, past La Muñeca's mother watering her famous dahlias with pink rubber hose and skinny string of water, to the house on La Fortuna, number 12, that has always been our house. (22-3)

The short story begins to change when the narrator and Abuelito reach their house, La Fortuna number 12. They count out loud the twenty-two steps up to the house as they walk them (incidentally the number of steps are the same the number of short stories in the cycle), and they count them in Spanish. The counting is divided into trios, and between each trio of numbers there are memories of the life in their home: what they used to eat for supper, the "mad parrot voice of the Abuela", that they used to fall asleep "with the television mumbling" and Abuelito's snoring (23). When the counting reaches eighteen, the narrator remembers him/herself in third person as "the grandchild, the one who will leave soon for that borrowed country – *duecinueve, veinte, veintiuno* – the one he will not remember, the one he is least familiar with" (23).

This is where the major shift in the short story occurs. We move away from the loci method, where each trio of steps recalls a memory from the past, and each trio of steps now involves predictions of what is going to happen. Despite there being only twenty-two steps, the narrator continues the counting until s/he reaches twenty-four and completes the trio of numbers. I believe that the numbers after twenty-two now signify the narrator's age or years past. Also, after this trio of numbers, rather than a short memory, like previously, the reader becomes faced with a rather vague, but explicit ellipsis. The section after twenty-four begins

with “years later” (23). We do not know how many years, but a significant time has passed, as becomes evident by the fact that the house on “La Fortuna, number 12” now is sold and the fact that “Márquez and La Muñeca’s mother move away” (23), and most significant of all, “Abuelito falls asleep one last time” (23). Now that all of these people that used to be a part of the narrator’s memories disappear, the memory itself starts to disintegrate. Moreover, after the next trio of numbers, “*Veinticinco, veintiséis, veintisiete*” (23), there is an additional ellipsis of “years after when I return” (23), which one can assume means that s/he was twenty-seven when she returned to Mexico and again walked the streets of his/her childhood memories. Now the narrator is truly faced with the loss of her/his memories, because Abuelito is gone, La Fortuna, number 12, is sold, and even “the basilica ... is crumbling and closed” (23). All the things that structured his/her memories are gone or crumbling.

The last sentence of the short story truly summarizes the entire short story, and expresses the loss that the narrator feels. “Who would’ve guessed, after all this time, it is me who will remember when everything else is forgotten, you who took with you to your stone bed something irretrievable, without a name?” (23), presumably the narrator is talking to Abuelito, reflecting upon how his/her connection to Mexico now is lost, and now that Abuelito and everything else that held his/her memories are gone, that connection and those memories cannot be retrieved. But it is more than just a connection that is gone, because without this connection the narrator has lost a vital part of his/her Chicana/o identity, and has to find out how to be a Mexican from an Anglo point of view, without having any ties left to Mexico.

4.1.3 “One Holy Night”

“One Holy Night” is the first story in the second part of the short story cycle, which is also called “One Holy Night”. In this part, the narrators are no longer children (or adults reflecting on childhood), as is the case in part one, and have moved into adolescence and the threshold of adulthood. The two short stories in this part both relay the struggles of becoming a grown woman, with all that this entails.

In “One Holy Night,” a young girl tells the story of how she met an older man while selling cucumbers and fruit from a pushcart, fell in love with him, and got pregnant, resulting in her being sent to Mexico. The man calls himself “Chaq Uxmal Paloquín” and claims to be

“of an ancient line of Mayan Kings” (Cisneros 27), and the young girl refers to herself at one point as “Ixchel” (30). I will argue that there are in fact three different narratives that can be drawn from this short story: One about Mayan religion and heritage, one about a young girl falling in love and thus stumbling head first into womanhood, and one silent and implicit story of child abuse. I will further argue that in “One Holy Night” religion and gender roles become the facilitators for child abuse.

The character of Boy Baby, or Chaq Uxmal Paloquín, as he calls himself, becomes a sort of self-styled personification of a Mayan king or deity, and he hides behind the mystique of an ancient religion. This Mayan persona becomes very believable, because he is so thoroughly convincing both to the narrator Ixchel, and also to the reader. The short story starts with a quote by Chaq Uxmal Paloquín: “*About the truth, if you give it to a person, then he has power over you. And if someone gives it to you, then they have made themselves your slave. It is a strong magic. You can never take it back*” (27). The quote is indented, in italics, and is placed spatially above, and apart from, the main text, making it impossible to miss or ignore. This type of quote is in fact something that is found throughout the cycle: such quotes can be seen under the titles of all three parts of the cycle, and below the titles of two of the stories that feature toward the end of the cycle. In all of these instances, the quotes are “real”, e.g. from musicians, composers and known songs, thus the character Chaq Uxmal Paloquín automatically attains an innate credibility for the reader. This credibility is further increased through the narrative voice of Ixchel, who accepts Chaq’s stories, and willingly throws herself into this made up narrative of his, and retells it like a fairy tale. Ixchel seems to make a conscious choice in believing Chaq, and there is a sense of willing ignorance, and an informed decision to ignore her better judgment, which becomes clear from the very beginning of the short story:

He said his name was Chaq. Chaq Uxmal Paloquín. That’s what he told me. He was of an ancient line of Mayan kings. Here, he said, making a map with the heel of his boot, this is where I come from, the Yucantán, the ancient cities. This is what Boy Baby said. (27)

There is a repetition of “He said,” and “he told me,” which initially may seem redundant. The passage would work just as well if one removed all but the first “He said.” However, by having them there, a relinquishing of responsibility becomes apparent. Ixchel emphasizes that “*he* said it,” “*he* told me,” like it has nothing to do with her, and a naïve well-he-said-it-so-it-

must-be-true mentality becomes apparent. This is also echoed in her lack of questioning regarding Boy Baby's name as he "said his name translated into boy, or boy-child, and so it was the street people nicknamed him Boy Baby"(29). According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica* Chaq was actually a Mayan deity and god of rain (Encyclopædia Britannica "Chaq"), so Chaq's explanation of his name is just made up. While Ixchel's believing Chaq's stories may be a somewhat conscious choice, toward the end of the short story there is evidence that that she actually might just be *that* naïve. She says, "I'm going to have five children. Five. Two girls. Two boys. And one baby. The girls will be called Lisette and Maritza. The boys I'll name Pablo and Sandro. And my baby. My baby will be named Alegre, because life will always be hard" (35). This seems like a very childish dream, that she will be able to have a baby that is neither boy nor girl, just a baby, forever. But then, she ends this train of thought with the somewhat wise conclusion that since life will be hard it is sensible to call her baby "Alegre," which translates to something like "happy" or "cheerful", but at the same time she proves her naivety and innocence, because having a baby named "happy" will not make life any easier.

In addition to believing Boy Baby's stories, and letting herself be swept away by his Mayan mystique, Ixchel also plays along with this romanticized fairy tale version of Mayan religion. In one way, one could say that it is inevitable that she would partake in Chaq's Mayan delusion, as Ixchel was the name of one of the most important old Mayan gods, known as midwife and weaver, and the wife of the creator-god Itzamanjaa³ (Nielsen 604). This religious element of their relationship also seems like something that appeals to Ixchel, and is an important part of the attraction she feels toward Chaq, and their relationship. Right at the beginning of the short story, when Ixchel begins to tell her story, she reveals that "[Chaq] said he would love me like a revolution, like a religion" (Cisneros 27). Moreover, Ixchel's rendition of the first time she and Chaq have sex seems, the way she tells it, like a religious ritual, or even a sacrament: "And what I remember next is how the moon, the pale moon with its one yellow eye, the moon of Tikal, and Tulum, and Chichén, stared through the pink plastic curtains" (30). Tikal, Tulum, and Chichén were all Mayan cities, and at this moment Ixchel in her mind becomes connected with these places through the stare of the same moon that also presided over these ancient cities, and one gets the sense of her

³ Paraphrased, and translated from Danish by me.

becoming part of something bigger than herself. In the second part of the passage, we reach the crux of this sacramental experience: “Then something inside bit me, and I gave out a cry as if the other, the one I wouldn’t be anymore, leapt out. So I was initiated beneath an ancient sky by a great and mighty heir – Chaq Uxmal Paloquín. I, Ixchel, his queen” (30). The moment she is no longer a virgin, Ixchel describes herself as being “initiated,” presumably into the line of the “great and mighty heir,” as she calls herself a queen, or it could be that she feels that she is becoming a part of Mayan history. Either way, she has changed, or the old self has “leapt out.” It should also be mentioned this is the only place in the short story where the name of the narrator is stated, and as she refers to herself as “Ixchel, his queen” it is plausible that Ixchel is not her true name, but that she in this moment feels like one of the greatest Mayan goddesses, or the use of this name might suggest that Ixchel is the name she has given to this Mayan version of herself that Chaq brought forth. Finally, the fact that Ixchel most likely had an upbringing where sex and sexuality was not a subject that was discussed made it this great, mystical thing that she knew existed, but did not understand. Therefore, when Chaq speaks of love and revolution, it fits very nicely with this over-romanticized idea that Ixchel has made up to fill the lack of information.

After the paragraph wherein Ixchel loses her virginity to Chaq, the effect of this Mayan mystique disappears, and Ixchel is faced with the life-altering consequences of her choices. Ixchel is only thirteen or fourteen years old, still a child, many would claim, but when she becomes pregnant, she is abruptly forced in to adulthood, and thus she is also made to deal with the expectations related to her newly defined role as a woman. As Ixchel begins to retell the story of how she ended up “... miles from home, in this town of dust, with one wrinkled witch woman ... and sixteen nosy cousins” (27), she starts like this: “I don’t know how many girls have gone bad from selling cucumber. I know I’m not the first” (27-8). Ixchel has “gone bad,” and as it is one of the first things she mentions, aside from the fact that she sells cucumbers, this statement becomes detrimental to her character in that she weakens her own credibility. This view Ixchel has of herself, that she has gone bad, is particularly interesting because it introduces one of what Alexandra Fitts calls “the three most prevalent representations of Mexican womanhood” (11). The three archetypes are: “the passive virgin, the sinful seductress, and the traitorous mother, idolized in the figures of the Virgin of Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona” (11). Thus, Ixchel’s having “gone bad” infers that she was good, and the only thing that has changed is that she has had sex and become pregnant, hence she has transformed from the passive Virgin of Guadalupe, into the sinful

seductress La Malinche. Moreover, these archetypes are so ingrained in Ixchel's culture that she has internalized them, resulting in her calling herself bad. This leaves us with the conclusion that when women lose their virginity or innocence by making a bad decision, it can in fact make them bad people, because there are no in-betweens: you are either the virgin or the temptress. While having unprotected, premarital sex at a young age and risking pregnancy is not the best decision one can make, it should not be the defining moment of determination of whether someone is bad or good, even more so considering the obvious power imbalance between Ixchel and the much older man who seduced her. However, for Ixchel, and probably many other women, it is.

While Ixchel's circumstances have changed, she remains in many respects the same, creating an internal conflict for her. Because in spite of Ixchel's surroundings now viewing and judging her according to these representations of womanhood mentioned above, Ixchel has not grown into a woman with acquired knowledge, age, and maturity just by having her first sexual experience, she has merely been let in on the secret of sex. "We were all the same somehow, laughing behind our hands, waiting the way all women wait, and when we find out, we wonder why the world and a million years made such a big deal over nothing" (30). It is clear that Ixchel feels somewhat underwhelmed and confused as to why sex is such a big deal, which is no wonder when her initial expectation of her first sexual experience was that she "wanted it to come undone like gold thread, like a tent full of birds" (28). The disillusionment that Ixchel experiences creates an imbalance between Ixchel and her surroundings, because to her having sex "wasn't a big deal. It wasn't any deal at all" (30), but because the people around her now view her in a completely different light. Furthermore, because of Ixchel's disappointment in this underwhelming experience, she is unable to feel according to how her surroundings now perceive her: "I know I was supposed to feel ashamed, but I wasn't ashamed. I wanted to stand on top of the highest building, the top-top floor and yell, I *know*" (30). She is unable to feel shame, because she finally knows the secret of sex, and she finally understands

why Abuelita didn't let me sleep over at Lourdes's house full of too many brothers, and why the Roman girl in the movies always runs away from the soldier, and what happens when the scenes in the love stories begin to fade, and why brides blush, and how it is that sex isn't simply a box you check *M* or *F* on in the test we get at school. (30-1)

This newfound knowledge makes Ixchel feel superior: “I was wise. The corner girls were still jumping into their stupid little hopscotch squares. I laughed inside” (31). However, this superiority becomes her downfall, as it makes her unable to understand the consequences of her actions. While the act of having sex may not have been a big deal, the implications of it are. But in her superiority, Ixchel cannot see that her life has changed forever; she simply does not understand, and as a result is not able to adapt to the changes. In the third-to-last paragraph, when she tells the other girls how it is to be with a man, she says “‘It’s a bad joke. When you find out you’ll be sorry’” (35). This statement may be interpreted to suggest that the severity of her situation has finally dawned on her, but as the next paragraph is the one where she explains that she wants five children, “Two girls. Two boys. And one baby” (35), in light of this naïve dream, it is more likely that “you’ll be sorry” just means that sex is no big deal, and not worth the effort.

While religion, gender roles and sexuality are themes that are dealt with explicitly in the short story, the lack of acknowledgement by all characters of the fact that Ixchel has been molested by a man nearly three times her age creates a very loud absence, which demands attention. These feminine archetypes, which as Fitts states are idolized in the religious and cultural figures of Virgin of Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona, are so cemented into the culture that when Ixchel is raped by Chaq, all she can see, and all her family can see, are the cultural and religious implications. None of the characters, including Ixchel herself, takes into consideration that Ixchel is the victim of a crime, and nor do they view Chaq as a perpetrator of this crime. When Abuelita discovers that Ixchel is “going to *dar a luz* [give birth], she cried until her eyes were little, and blamed Uncle Lalo, and Uncle Lalo blamed this country, and Abuelita blamed the infamy of men. That is when she ... called me a *sinvergüenza* [scoundrel] because I *am* without shame” (32). The blame is placed on the closest male family member, on the U.S., on men in general, and on Ixchel and her lack of morals, but not on the one person who is really to blame for the sexual assault. Moreover, when Abuelita blames “the infamy of men,” she in some way releases Chaq from all responsibility as the word “infamy” implies that this sort of behavior is well known, something that just is and cannot be helped since he is a man. Thus the blame shifts to Ixchel: If she had had better morals, if she had acted as the Virgin, she would have been able avoid this innate male behavior of Chaq, and would not have gotten herself into this position. And as if being molested by an older man and becoming pregnant was not enough for this young girl to bear, her Abuelita seems to think that Ixchel has fallen from the grace of God. “I woke

up ... and Abuelita was sprinkling holy water on my head” (32). This action of sprinkling holy water implies that Abuelita was trying to cleanse Ixchel of her sins, which further places the blame on Ixchel, as she is the sinner that needs salvation. While it may be that Ixchel played along with Chaq in his Mayan delusion, and actually wanted to have sex with him, this is all told from Ixchel’s perspective as a 13 or 14 year-old child. However, if you keep in mind the Ixchel and Chaq’s ages, the story changes, and a pattern of predatory behavior and sexual grooming emerges. According to Samantha Carven et al., the definition of sexual grooming is:

A process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child’s compliance and maintaining the child’s secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender’s abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions. (297)

In the short story, Chaq keeps returning to Ixchel while she is alone at the pushcart (28), giving her attention and gaining her trust. And as Ixchel is alone while working, she has no parents, and the only adults that she might be able to confide in are Uncle Lalo and Abuelita, who are not likely confidants for a child in the beginning of her teens. Thus, with no adults around that need convincing, Ixchel becomes easily accessible, and is placed in an especially vulnerable position, which makes her an easy target for Chaq. Following his fourth visit to Ixchel at her pushcart, he brings her a “Kool-Aid in a plastic cup,” and this is when Ixchel “knew what [she] felt for him” (28). Chaq keeps returning, expanding upon the story that he is a Mayan king, gaining Ixchel’s trust and confidence to such a degree that when Ixchel asks him how old he is, he answers that “he didn’t know. The past and the future are all the same thing” (28), and Ixchel concludes with him seeming like a “boy and baby and man all at once” (28). This shows that Chaq has made his relationship to Ixchel appear normal to her. She accepts his explanations without question. Since Ixchel does not appear to have any close relations or friends, it becomes easier for Chaq to maintain secrecy, because Ixchel has no immediate or available confidant to whom she can disclose the nature of their relationship. Additionally, Chaq establishes an element of fear, and a very discrete threat of violence, without actually using violence. While they are in the back room of Esparza’s garage, where Chaq resides, he shows Ixchel his guns, “twenty-four in all” (29). Among the guns there are rifles, pistols, machine guns, “and several tiny weapons with mother-of-pearl handles that look like toys” (29). Chaq explains to Ixchel that it is “So you’ll see who I am ... laying them

all out on the bed of newspapers. So you'll understand" (29). Whom he wants Ixchel to see, and what he wants her to understand, is somewhat ambiguous. Whether displaying the weapons is a threat of violence, or an attempt to show that he is not a man who is not afraid of a fight, it adds a tone of gravity and severity to the situation that Ixchel does not appreciate as she thinks "But I didn't want to know" (29). After this scene, Chaq and Ixchel have sex, and right before they do it, he says "You must not tell anyone what I am going to do" (30). And if you take the scene with the display of guns together with Chaq's insisting that Ixchel must not tell anyone of what he is about to do, it becomes a very discrete, but also very real threat of violence, as Ixchel most likely has the memory of the guns in mind as Chaq initiates the sex.

In "One Holy Night," Chaq's systematic grooming and molestation of Ixchel becomes a hidden narrative among the narratives of archetypical Mexican ideals of womanhood, namely those of Mayan heritage and religious morality. Chaq's convincing character, swept in the mystique of an ancient religion, becomes a romantic fantasy for Ixchel, and both the reader and Ixchel are swept up in this religious mystique permeating Chaq. In this way, religion plays a central role as a device for deception. The Mayan religion acts as a backdrop distracting both the reader and Ixchel from the realities of the world, to such an extent that Ixchel is able to commit fully to her naïveté. The religious aspects of the text drift away as Ixchel is disillusioned of her fantasy of adult love and sex, and the fantasy is replaced with Ixchel's struggle to fit in with the traditional female gender roles pushed upon her. When Ixchel is thrust into womanhood by way of an unplanned pregnancy, she is placed in the role of the "sinful seductress" by her surroundings, a role with which she does not identify. The change of roles was not something that figured in Ixchel's shortsighted dreams of an adult sexual relationship, and the uncomfortable realization that society does not see her as it used to gives the reader unique insights into the rigid structure of gender roles figuring in Chicana/o culture. With regards to sexuality, what is represented in the text is the collision between the immature and naïve sexuality of a teenager, and the predatory sexuality of an abuser, put up against the nonexistent dialogue on the subject of sex within Ixchel's family. Ixchel's rape is not represented explicitly in the text, and the subject is carefully avoided at every turn, further deepening the reader's outrage over the abuse, but at the same time the text very efficiently illustrates how female gender roles, religion, and conservative views on female sexuality can leave a young Chicana girl very vulnerable.

4.1.4 “Remember the Alamo”

“Remember the Alamo” is the fourth story in the third part of the short story cycle, which is called “There Was a Man, There Was a Woman”. In this part, the narrators are all adults who have left the protection of their families to start a life, and are trying to figure it out on their own. This third section is the one that contains the most stories, 13 in all, and it also contains the longest stories.

In “Remember the Alamo,” Cisneros explores and challenges Chicano masculinity through the narrator Rudy Cantú, a queer man working as a dancer at a drag show performing as Tristán “every Thursday night at the Travisty. Behind the Alamo” (63). Cisneros has created a short story where a battle of male gender expectations is unfolding at the site (or rather right behind the site) of a very famous, culturally significant battle, revered for its heroes, who embody the stereotypical, hegemonic masculinity, thus creating a contrasting and alternative story to the battle of the Alamo.

“Tristán” seems to be more than Rudy’s stage persona; indeed, “Tristán” is better described as an alternate personality. Despite Rudy’s statement that he is Tristán when he performs, it quickly becomes clear that Tristán exists off stage as well. “But I’m not Rudy when I perform. I mean, I’m not Rudy Cantú from Falfurrias anymore. I’m Tristán” (63). When Rudy becomes Tristán, he leaves his background behind, and he does not “become” Tristán, he *is* Tristán. This statement emphasizes that Tristán is not someone whom Rudy transforms into like an actor transforming into a character from a play, but someone who exists within him at all times. This dual existence within Rudy becomes echoed when he describes Tristán’s clothes: “magnificent. Absolutely perfect, like a second skin” (64). In this case, “second skin” refers to something more than a perfect fit. It is the actual second skin of this second person within Rudy. Furthermore, Tristán “[d]resses all in white in the summer, all in black in the winter. No in-between except for the show” (66). While this could be read as just a very thorough background story, it is more likely that Tristán actually appears other places than on stage every Thursday night. Furthermore, it is interesting that Tristán says that there is no in-between, only black and white, as the definition of Chicana/o culture and mestiza/o identity is existing, as Anzaldúa describes it, in “a constant state of mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways” (*Borderlands 100*). Thus Rudy’s reality as a Chicano is exactly the opposite of what Tristán claims.

Throughout the text, the narration switches between that of Rudy and that of Tristán, and sometimes it is not possible to figure out which of the characters is narrating. In a passage where Rudy is describing Tristán's personality, the narration moves from second person to first person, and it becomes difficult to determine who is speaking, and to whom they are speaking:

He's the greatest live act in San Anto. Doesn't put up with bull. No way. Either loves you or hates you. Ferocious, I'm telling you ... Isn't tight with nobody but family and friends. Doesn't need to be. Go on, say it. I want you to. I'll school you. I'll show you how it's done. (65)

It seems that the passage represents Tristán speaking, telling someone how they can be as ferocious as he, showing them how to be "tight with nobody but family," but there are not any clear markers of dialogue in the text. Thus this paragraph mirrors the relationship between Tristán and Rudy: there is no clear point of separation where one becomes the other.

The alternate personality of "Tristán" enables Rudy to dissociate himself from the harsh realities of his life. Consequently, "Tristán" is an effective coping mechanism that is necessary for Rudy to survive. While Rudy may not suffer from a mental illness like dissociative identity disorder, being "Tristán" makes it possible for Rudy to distance himself from his trauma-ridden life: being queer, having an estranged family, suffering from AIDS, being raped as a child, and general stigmatization from society. Tristán is the idealized version of Rudy, and through Tristán, Rudy can live the life he was denied due to his not conforming to society's expectation of him as a man.

Tristán's family? They love him no matter what. His ma proud of his fame – That's my *m'ijo*. His sisters jealous because he's the pretty one ... At first his father said What's this? But then when the newspaper articles started pouring in, well, what could he do but send photocopies to the relatives in Mexico, right? And Tristán sends them all free backstage passes. They drive all the way from the Valley for the opening of the show ... It's unbelievable. Last time he invited his family they took the whole damn third floor of La Mansión del Rio. I'm not kidding. (65)

Tristán has a family that emanates unconditional love, and even his father eventually becomes proud of him. They go out of their way to show their support and approval of him. Yet, the passage ends with "I'm not kidding," which conveys the notion that Rudy knows that what he

is saying seems unlikely. Thus, this remark ends up sowing a seed of doubt toward the truth of his story, rather than serving the intended purpose of convincing us of the truth. Toward the end of the short story, this doubt is proven well founded, as Rudy describes how “Thursday nights ... [t]hat’s when Tristán’s life starts” (66), a life “[w]ithout ulcers or gas stations or hospital bills or bloody sheets or pubic hairs in the sink. Lovers in your arms pulling farther and farther away from you ... Letters home sent back unopened” (66-7). Rudy’s family does not support him, they have rejected him, and Rudy’s reality is in stark contrast to that of Tristán. Furthermore, Rudy has AIDS, which further ostracizes him. Tristán, however, takes control of the disease, without fear. Initially Rudy says that it’s a one-man show: “I’m Tristán. Every Thursday night at the Travisty ... One-man show, girl. Flamenco, salsa, tango, fandango, merengue, cumbia, cha-cha-chá” (63). Then, when he further describes his performance he says that “every Thursday night Tristán dances with La Calaca Flaca. Tristán takes the fag hag by the throat and throttles her senseless. Tristan’s not afraid of La Flaquita, Thin Death” (64). “La Calaca Flaca” translates to “the skinny skull,” and “La Flaquita” to “The skinny,” which raises the question whether “La Flaquita” is a person, or a metaphor for the disease. Despite Rudy stating that it is a one-man show, it does not necessarily mean that there is only one person on stage. The statement can be read as suggesting that there is only one male on stage, Flaquita being a woman, or that there are two men on stage, but one is in drag, thus not fulfilling the criteria to be considered a male. Alternatively, it could be that La Flaquita is not a person at all, but an anthropomorphic manifestation of a disease which leads to a “Thin Death,” and when Tristán takes this thin death across the floor, he is not leading his human partner in dance, but taking charge of this disease, facing death and controlling it.

Whether La Flaquita is a person or not, the feminine “La” is used in a derogative way, meaning that Rudy and/or Tristán reproduces heteronormative and patriarchal gender norms, despite not complying with these norms himself (or themselves). Every Thursday night, Tristán takes the “the fag hag by the throat and throttles her senseless” (64). “Fag hag” normally means a heterosexual (presumably cis-gendered) woman who spends a lot of time with homosexual men, and is often used in a negative way. So, when Tristán violently throttles the fag hag, it is either an extremely offensive and degrading attitude toward his drag-clad male partner, exposing that there is a reproduction of the heteronormative gender roles within this queer community where the feminine male is subordinate to the masculine male leading the dance, or it is an effort to take charge and dominate a disease, by rendering it

as something feminine that thus can, and should, be dominated by this masculine man. The identity of La Flaca remains ambiguous throughout the story, but this figure unambiguously remains an object of ridicule and domination. “A dance until death. Every Thursday night when he glides with La Flaca. Wraps his arms around her. La Muertita with her shit-eating, bless-her-heart grin. Doesn’t faze him. La Death with her dress up the crack of her ass. The girl’s pathetic” (66).

By naming the short story “Remember the Alamo,” and structuring the text similarly to that of the song with the same name by Jane Bowers, in addition to calling the club “Travisty,” Cisneros draws clear lines between the battle of the Alamo and the battle that queer Chicano men like Rudy encounter when failing to comply with male gender expectations in the face of heteronormative masculinity. Throughout the short story, there are breaks in the text made by lists of names, and the short story actually begins with such a list “*Gustavo Galino, Ernie Sepúlveda, Jessie Robles, Jr., Ronny DeHoyos, Christine Zamora ...*” (63), lists that Mary Pat Brady argues are only there to “force the reader to speculate on their significance” (131). While I agree with Brady that the names do indeed force the reader to speculate on their significance, I do not believe that this is their only function. The names bring to mind a list of names commemorating the dead found on war memorials, which is a fitting association as the name of the story after all is a cry of remembrance to the battle of the Alamo. Harryette Mullen explains that the names are from what she refers to as the “AIDS quilt” (6), also known as “The Names Project,” which “was undertaken to bring attention to AIDS deaths and the marginalization of people with AIDS and HIV” (18). Mullen explains that “The project has resulted in the construction of a huge quilt-like patchwork memorializing people who have died of AIDS,” but that “Cisneros used invented names in ‘Remember the Alamo’” (18). Furthermore, the way these lists of names are spread out between paragraphs recalls the structure of the song “Remember the Alamo,” in which the names of the heroes such as Travis, Bowie, Davy Crockett, and the scout who was sent with Travis’s letter of appeal for help are recounted throughout the verses. These names, then, could be a commemoration of lives lost in another battle, possibly the same battle that the narrator Rudy is fighting, against gender roles, sexual abuse, and AIDS. Suzanne Bost has a different interpretation of Cisneros’s choice of title. She states that “Cisneros’s choice of the Anglo-Texan rally cry for her title is ironic” as its “remembrance undermines ... [Anglo-American] values and heroes” (514). While I will not refute her interpretation, I argue that while Cisneros highlights alternative values, and alternative interpretations of masculinity,

heroism and gender in her short story, that does not necessarily mean that that this focus undermines the Anglo-American counterpart. Rather, the title works, just like Travis's letter "To the People of Texas & All Americans in the World," like a call for attention to this alternative version of struggle, heroism and masculinity. I would further argue that in her choice of title, Cisneros creates a juxtaposition between this hegemonic and Anglo-American narrative, and the narrative Rudy and Tristán represent. Moreover, the Battle of the Alamo as a source for Texan pride and patriotism despite its being well known that the Texans suffered a tremendous loss, is already a distorted representation of events due to the contrast between heroism in the folklore and the realities of the battle. Cisneros points this out in her night-club-pun "Travisty," spelling it with an "i" rather than an "e" referencing the surname of lieutenant colonel William B. Travis, a pun that is so laden in sarcasm that it is hard to interpret it otherwise; a travesty being "A false, absurd, or distorted representation of something" (oed.com). However, this widely known misrepresentation that Cisneros points out through her pun unequivocally makes room for alternative interpretations of heroism, masculinity and values to be ascribed to this monument, like the ones presented in Cisneros's short story "Remember the Alamo." When Rudy explains the location of the club he works at, he says, "at the Travisty. Behind the Alamo, you can't miss it" (63). This is the first and only time that the Alamo is mentioned, and the only time that the Travisty, in which a major part of the plot unfolds, is placed in relation to the Alamo. Mary Pat Brady argues that

[t]he club's location 'behind' the Alamo positions it in the heart of a tourist zone but outside of tourism's purview. 'Remember the Alamo' both quotes the battle cry and ironically twists its significance, reducing it to a directional signal while suggesting that the Alamo itself has more than one meaning. (131)

Bost follows Brady's argumentation by stating that

[t]he literal meaning of the Alamo in Cisneros's story is the directional one, one that privileges Tristán's transgender Chicano relationship to the site, 'behind' the tourist front. Just as Cisneros's story reveals Rudy's pain beneath the glamorous artifice of Tristán, Tristán's narrative reveals suppressed pain and queerness behind the mythic Alamo. (515)

While I agree with their interpretations of the literal meaning of the Alamo being directional at first glance, I disagree with the argued reductive quality of the preposition "behind", and

that the use of “behind” somehow infers that it is less important. In my analysis I have argued that Rudy and Tristán are parallel, two personalities existing equally, but as juxtapositions to one another, which is contradictory to Bost’s argument that “Rudy’s pain (is) beneath the glamorous artifice of Tristán.” After all Tristán’s name is a variation of the Spanish word for sad (*triste*), which brings Rudy’s sadness front and center, not leaving it “behind” at all.

In this analysis, I have investigated the struggle that queer Chicano men face with regards to gender roles. Through “Remember the Alamo”, Cisneros highlights several key issues that mark this struggle through the character(s) Rudy and Tristán. By focusing on the alternate personality of Rudy, Tristán, and how this personality functions both as an escape from the realities of stigma and exclusion from society which Rudy faces when living as a queer Chicano man with AIDS, as well as an empowering hero figure, I have illustrated the impossibility of unification that arises between Rudy and the heteronormative masculine ideal of Chicano culture. Despite Rudy’s struggle, which has resulted in the creation of this alternate personality, I have shown that Rudy’s use of language perpetuates the strict gender roles he is fighting, and mirrors the perception of females as weak and passive that are prescribed by these gender roles. In addition to the portrayal of Rudy, Cisneros uses several lyrical or even poetic elements in the text to further enhance the reader’s experience. Together with the duality that the characters Rudy and Tristán create, the use of the names of what are presumably AIDS victims, in the style of a war memorial, and the use of the Anglo-Texan war cry of “Remember the Alamo,” which brings to mind the song celebrating the heroes of the battle, reveals a pattern of juxtaposing pairs in this short story: the victims of the Battle of the Alamo and the victims of AIDS, the Travisty and the Alamo, and Rudy and Tristan. And as juxtaposing pairs, one does not assume a place in front of the other, they are all side by side, contrasting one another without diminishing one another. Thus, in writing “Remember the Alamo,” Cisneros has created a contrasting and alternative narrative to the battle of the Alamo, consequently also ascribing a new and alternative meaning to the expression “Remember the Alamo,” namely to remember that there is not only one expression of the male gender and masculinity.

4.1.5 “Never Marry a Mexican”

In her story “Never Marry a Mexican” Cisneros tackles the feminine archetype of La Malinche, the “Indian woman who served as interpreter and lover to Hernán Cortés while he conquered her land and massacred her people” (Fitts 12), through the character Clemencia, a U.S. born Mexican with a Mexican father born in Mexico, and a Mexican mother born in the U.S.. In the short story Clemencia becomes the lover of her white, married, rich, older professor, Drew, who eventually leaves her, and goes back to his wife. As revenge, Clemencia enters into a relationship with Drew’s teenage son, and the short story itself reads as something similar to a confession or explanation of this illicit relationship to her new lover. In “Never Marry a Mexican” class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality intersect in such a way that Clemencia becomes unable to identify and separate the categories, unable to navigate them, because they have infiltrated each other’s meanings. The result of this is that Clemencia has a distorted understanding of gender, and even more importantly; Clemencia herself becomes genderless.

The legend of La Malinche has become a feminine archetype that has cemented itself in the Chicana/o culture, and Clemencia is a representation of this. That clear lines can be drawn between La Malinche and Clemencia is made explicit in the text as Clemencia and her lover, Drew, refer to each other as La Malinche and Cortez: “Drew, remember when you used to call me your Malinalli? It was a joke, a private game between us, because you looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours” (74). Furthermore, Clemencia also, like Malinche, “[s]ometimes ... work as a translator” (71). Gloria Anzaldúa explains how, and to what extent, Malinche’s betrayal has become something that is being used to stigmatize Chicanas; and also how this legend has become an internalized shame toward the Indian part of the Chicana identity:

Malinali Tenepat, or Malintzin, has become known as la Chingada—the fucked one. She has become the bad word that passes a dozen times a day from the lips of Chicanos. Whore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos spit out with contempt. The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, indias y mestizas, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. (“Movimientos” 7)

Clemencia carries this guilt and shame bestowed upon her by Malinche, and through her name, Clemencia is asking for clemency, mercy, for the Indian in her. Clemencia's suppression of the Indian in her becomes apparent as she is only able to appreciate this part of herself through Drew's acceptance: "My skin dark against yours. Beautiful, you said. You said I was beautiful, and when you said it, Drew, I was ... Malinnalli you called me, remember? *Mi doradita*. I liked when you spoke to me in my language. I could love myself and think myself worth loving" (Cisneros 74). When Drew, a white man, accepts and appreciates Clemencia's dark skin and her language, it is a validation that she is not able to attain on her own. While it is apparent that Clemencia carries the shame of Malinche, she does not seem to be fully conscious of the fact that she is, which also might be why she is not able to accept it. However, she does seem to recognize that there is something within her causing trouble, and she also questions this:

What is it inside me that makes me so crazy at 2 A.M.? I can't blame it on alcohol in my blood when there isn't any. It's something worse. Something that poisons the blood and tips me when the nights swell and I feel as if the whole sky were leaning against my brain. And if I killed someone on a night like this? And if it was *me* I killed instead, I'd be guilty of getting in the line of crossfire, innocent bystander, isn't it a shame. (82-3)

Clemencia seems to be cognizant that there is some part of her that makes her "crazy." There is something in Clemencia that poisons her blood which makes "the whole sky" lean against her brain. If we read this as the internalized shame described by Anzaldúa, Clemencia has identified that there is something in her blood, something perceived as bad, which to her feels like a burden placed upon her by the world. This is the Indian part of her identity that she has been forced to suppress, which she can only accept and see the beauty of when it is recognized by a white man. Thus, when Clemencia imagines killing herself, she would be, as she puts it, an "innocent bystander," because she would have died as a result of the sanctions put upon her for the actions Malinche. Clemencia is expected to take the blame for these actions, to deny the existence of the Indian within her, which is an impossible task. Hence, Clemencia is in the line of crossfire, between Malinche and the people she betrayed.

For Clemencia, the meanings of identifying categories such as class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality have become separated from their signifiers when moved across the border of Mexico and the U.S.. This becomes clear from the very first paragraph in the short story when Clemencia remembers what her mother told her about marriage: "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" (68). Jean Wyatt argues that in this paragraph we see that "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?" (246) The question that Wyatt asks, is a question that it seems Clemencia also has asked. Clemencia insists that U.S. born Mexican are not the same as Mexican born Mexicans, however she does not seem able to articulate why that is the case. I believe the reason for this is that for Clemencia ethnicity and class intersect and affect each other in the sense that class is not necessarily tied to economic proficiency or living standard, but also to ethnicity. Clemencia's father was from an upper middle class Mexican family, and her mother a Mexican who was born in the U.S. in a poor family, and Clemencia explains that her father married down by marrying her mother: "[my mother] was from *el otro lado*, the other side, and my father had married down by marrying her. If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado*, that would've been different. That would've been marrying up, even if the white girl was poor" (69). What Clemencia is actually saying here, is that her Mexican father married down because her mother was a U.S. born Mexican and thus in some sense less Mexican than Clemencia's father. However, if Clemencia's father had married a white woman, it would have been marrying up, no matter what her economic or social status in the U.S. was. Following Clemencia's line of reasoning, there emerges an ethnic hierarchy and an internalized racism; a Chicana/o being part Mexican and American is considered "less than" someone who is fully Mexican, e.g. a Mexican born in Mexico, but a white person will always be above both these two categories. Despite creating this hierarchical order of ethnicity and class, Clemencia does not include herself in this system, and believes that she is without class: "I'm amphibious. I'm a person who doesn't belong to any class ... Not to the poor, whose neighborhood I share. Not to the rich, who come to my exhibitions and by my work. Not to the middle class from which my sister Ximena and I fled" (71-2). In this excerpt, Clemencia ties class explicitly to economic status alone, and does not seem to factor in ethnicity to her class organization. Though it is not stated, this more conventional class view of rich and poor which Clemencia applies here, might be due to her thinking about white Anglo Americans, for whom ethnicity does not affect their class belonging as they already are above every other ethnicity. This reveals the racism that is internalized in Clemencia, as she argues that being white is better than being Mexican, and that being only part Mexican living in an Anglo culture, like herself, is the worst alternative. Furthermore, due to her Mexicanness

Clemencia does not place herself in any class-system, neither Mexican as she is not Mexican enough, nor the white, Anglo-American system built solely on economic status.

The intersection of class and ethnicity, and the internalized racism it reveals, also complicates Clemencia's relation to gender. The advice given by Clemencia's mother, "never marry a Mexican," has become ingrained in Clemencia to such an extent that she does not consider Mexican men as men anymore: "Mexican men, forget it ... those weren't men. Not men I considered as potential lovers. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban ... I don't care. I never saw them. My mother did this to me" (69). Not only does Clemencia not see Mexican men as men, she also groups nearly all the men in Middle and South-America into the category of "Mexican" (69). Thus, what in its origin was advice given from mother to daughter, has become a mantra which has taken on additional meaning to such an extent that now "never marry a Mexican" actually means "never marry any man from any country south of the U.S.." Similarly to how Clemencia is unable to place herself within any class, despite having no problem organizing other people into such a system, Clemencia is surprised when her white lover Drew does not see Clemencia as someone he could marry: "[b]esides, he could *never* marry *me*. You didn't think ...? *Never marry a Mexican. Never marry a Mexican ...* No, of course not. I see. I see" (80). This reveals a paradox for Clemencia, who as discussed sees herself as not belonging to any such social or economic categories; when that someone she does consider a man, as she has deemed him a suitable lover, applies the same, racist categorization on her as she does to all "Mexican men." But then, she remembers her mother's advice "never marry a Mexican," and a certain understanding emerges.

Clemencia is a Chicana who has embraced her sexuality. This is rather interesting, as Alexandra Fitts explains that "[t]he weight of guilt imposed on women for La Malinche's betrayal of her people and for her sexual transgressions has led to a deeply conflicted self. In order to be 'true' to her people, a Mexican or Chicana woman must deny her sexuality" (13). Therefore, since Clemencia has embraced her sexuality, she is not true to her people. Fitts argues that for "Clemencia, the issues of race and gender are at odds" and that "as [Clemencia] feels forced to choose her primary allegiance" (14). Clemencia is no doubt at odds with both ethnicity and gender, and as discussed above, Clemencia does not initially identify either Mexican or Chicana. This does not mean that she chooses gender as her primary allegiance; in fact, I would argue that Clemencia does not choose, and therefore to some extent has become genderless. Clemencia continuously objectifies herself throughout the short story: remembering the "time when all [she] wanted was to belong to a man ... be

worn on his arm like an expensive jewel brilliant in the light of day” (68), explaining that men have “come to [her] when they wanted the sweet meat” (69), recounts how rich people like to “have [her] decorate the lawn like an exotic orchid for hire” (71), how she has “been waiting patient as a spider all these years” (75) for Drew’s son to grow up, and when she met Drew and his wife at a gallery and felt that everyone “could [her] me for what [she] was” (79). Expensive jewel, sweet meat, exotic orchid, a spider, and what. Clemencia sees herself not as a woman, or even a “who,” but as a “what,” a thing. Clemencia is not only outside the category of gender; but also outside humanity. Clemencia illustrates this feeling of not belonging in the last paragraph where she says: “[h]uman beings pass me in the street, and I want to reach out and strum them as if they were guitars. Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely” (83). Clemencia refers to those she sees as “human beings” instead of people, and when thinking of reaching out and connecting with them, she objectifies them. Moreover, there is a feeling of observation expressed “all humanity strikes me as beautiful,” like humanity is something that Clemencia usually is not concerned with, but that she suddenly sees and appreciates.

Clemencia’s “genderlessness” and outsider status is also illustrated through her sexuality. By only having her sexuality, the only way Clemencia knows how to relate to the world is through her body. Clemencia is unable to communicate through language with Drew and feels that she is “useless with words” around him, “as if the words [she] needed [had]n’t been invented yet” (78). But in bed Clemencia feels that she has him for a little, talking to Drew telling him that “I leapt inside you and split you like an apple. Opened you for the other to look and not give back ... Your body doesn’t lie. It’s not silent like you” (78). Clemencia feels she is able to communicate with Drew through sex, and by splitting Drew open she is able to see him. Also, the fact that Clemencia is the one splitting Drew open is very interesting as it is a very masculine gender expression. By doing the splitting Clemencia is the active one and Drew the passive object she opens, and this action further distances Clemencia from any standard gender category.

While Clemencia is a victim, both of the actions of Malinche, and to her lover Drew’s betrayal, she is also a victimizer who causes harm onto others. Geraldine Stoneham observes that Clemencia is “[d]oomed always to exist within a racial and class-cultural wasteland, unanchored by a sense of ever belonging either to her ethnic or her natal homeland, her possibilities are all destructive” (244), a claim that Clemencia herself supports when she states that “I’m vindictive and cruel, and I’m capable of anything” (Cisneros 68). This

vindictiveness illustrates itself in Clemencia's reproduction of the same betrayals she herself has suffered. Clemencia has lost all contact with her mother after her father died, attributing it to her mother engaging in a relationship with a white man "who she was seeing even while [her] father was sick. Even then. That's what I can't forgive" (73). Clemencia reproduces this betrayal when she also engages in a relationship with a white man, while he is married, but does not have the introspective understanding necessary to see what she is doing. Clemencia also reproduces Drew's behavior towards her, onto Drew's son. Drew used to call Clemencia "his *doradita*" (76), which means golden, but also refers to a bird called doradito, and Clemencia calls Drew's son a "sparrow ... [her] stupid little bird" (82) which she lures into a false sense of security as she prepares to snap her teeth (82). This is very similar to how Clemencia and Drew's relationship was, with Clemencia feeling safe, until Drew's sudden and devastating rejection. Clemencia's vindictiveness and aggression is probably most prominent in the paragraph where she explains why she likes to have sex with men while their wives are giving birth:

It's always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that, without their knowing it. To know I've had their husbands when they were anchored in blue hospital rooms, their guts yanked out, the baby sucking their breasts while their husband sucked mine. All this while their ass stitches were still hurting. (76-7)

What is interesting here, is that Clemencia seems to think that motherhood and the feminine existence are mutually dependent. Thus by ruining a woman's transition into motherhood, she believes that she is killing them. Moreover, Clemencia's violent description of giving birth might be a reproduction of the anger she feels for being genderless as a result of her owning her sexuality. Hence Clemencia is putting her anger for not conforming to society's standards of femininity and womanhood onto those who do conform.

Toward the end of the short story Clemencia tries to create a discourse for herself in which she does have a place in society. On her way home from her final evening with Drew, Clemencia has stolen the baby from the center of Drew's wife's Babushka doll, and she stops at a "muddy creek where winos piss and rats swim" and there throws in the "Barbie doll's toy" which "gave [her] a feeling like nothing before and since. Then [she] drove home and slept like the dead" (82). Maythee Rojas reads this scene as a "final violation against the maternal and Megan's whiteness [which] leaves Clemencia at peace ... Having accomplished the severest of gestures, she can now begin to seek out a more enlightened, Clemencia-identified-

and-defined discourse for herself” (146). I believe that this new “Clemencia-identifies-and-defined discourse” is one of a version of motherhood, meaning that Clemencia wants to connect to society and humans in a caring and loving way. This is seen in the very last lines of the short story where Clemencia expresses her wish for connection to others: “I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say There, [sic] there, it’s alright honey. There, there, there” (83). Maybe this final action may also be a reproduction, but not of something done to Clemencia, but something that she wished somebody had done; comforting Clemencia, soothing her, giving her the clemency she is asking for in her name, and telling her that everything is going to be alright.

In the short story “Never Marry a Mexican” Clemencia becomes a reenactment of the legend of Maliche. A character who exists outside gender, class and ethnicity, and who also “dramatizes ... double unbelonging through [her] inability to function in either Anglo or Mexican discourse (Wyatt 246). Her ownership of her sexuality is what has condemned her to live in an ethnic and class-cultural wasteland, where she desperately tries to find a way to connect with, and find her place within humanity.

4.2 The Cycle: Synthesizing Form and Content

As mentioned previously, one of the most significant things about the short story cycle as a genre, is the tension between the many closed stories, and the cycle as a whole, which make the short story cycle set itself against complete cohesion. This tension is in large part created by what is not there, the lack of information, created by the gaps between stories. Lundén argues that “[m]aybe the most genre-specific feature of the short story composite is that of seeming negation and absence” (89), and that although there are links and patterns between stories “what really stands out in this form of narrative is the disruption created by the gaps between the stories” (89). These gaps, and this disruption is what in *Woman Hollering Creek* provide possibilities of multiplicity and contradicting interpretations of problems relating to identity. Having analyzed the short stories in isolation, with a focus on to themes central to identity; religion, gender and gender roles, and sexuality, it has become clear to me that what the short story cycle does is that it creates the openness needed to fragmented markers of identity. By using the structure of organizing her stories into sections corresponding to ages, Cisneros is able to explore vastly different representations and experiences of Chicana/o

identities. Moreover, through this structure perspectives of different ages are featured; showing that in childhood gender role and gender performance is not as prominent as it is for adults, and she can portray this in isolated, equally important stories, without being bound to the linear development of that character. Additionally, the short story cycle shows itself as the perfect genre for the mestiza/o identity, because just like the mestiza/o is a product of singular parts that does not always cohere the short story cycle is made up of parts that also at times resist cohesion and resolution. Thus, the genre through its structure is able to portray the resistance of unification that is also felt in the mestiza/o.

5 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have provided a review of attempted genre classifications of *Woman Hollering Creek*, I have furthermore given a background on the short story cycle, and joined these two themes in classifying *Woman Hollering Creek* as a short story cycle. To demonstrate the utility of the short story cycle, I have performed a thematic analysis of woman hollering creek, where I looked at the portrayal of the themes religion, gender and gender roles, and sexuality.

In my analysis I found Religion figures as a theme in many different ways, and serves different roles of importance throughout the short stories in *Woman Hollering Creek*. In the short story “Tepeyac,” religion, through religious monuments, works as a central part, together with the memories of Abuelito, of what makes the narrator feel a connection to her/his Mexican part of her/his identity. In “Mericans,” religion and religiousness functions as what separates the narrator Micaela from her Mexicanness, which takes the form of her very religious grandmother. Micaela’s misinterpretation of religious rituals, and the fact that the grandmother prays extra for the grandchildren (e.g. Micaela and her siblings) born in the U.S. highlights the separation of Micaela and her grandmother, of Micaela and Mexican religious practices, and of Micaela and Mexico.

We also see that religion is something that can invite trust, and give a sense of security through its mystique. This is seen in “Mericans,” where the grandmother, as a devout believer, takes on the responsibility of intervening with God on behalf of the family, but also in “One Holy Night,” where Chaq’s relation to ancient Mayan kings makes him trustworthy for the narrator Ixchel. However, where the grandmother in “Mericans” respects the trust she is given by her family, Chaq abuses it. In “One Holy Night,” Chaq uses this fictive narrative of a Maya background and the mystique and trust inherent in religion as part of the grooming for sexual molestation of a child. Furthermore, Ixchel’s grandmother’s religiousness leads her to ignore the sexual abuse suffered by her granddaughter, and instead the grandmother focuses on the shame that Ixchel has brought on herself and tries to pray this shame away.

As we look at these short stories in combination, we have an idea that religion can be vastly different things for different Chicana/o people, but also that there are some commonalities. Religion can function both as a way of feeling connected to the Mexican part of a Mestiza/o identity, but it can also be what creates a separation.

Many of the short stories analyzed show how difficult the gender and gender roles in Chicana/o culture can be to navigate. In “One Holy Night,” we see the narrator Ixchel’s childish belief that losing one’s virginity is what makes one a woman. This belief is shattered when Ixchel loses her virginity, and is suddenly faced with the reality of the feminine archetypes that come with being a woman. The implications of what it means to be a Chicana woman also become apparent in “Mericans,” when Micaela reflects upon her brothers using “girl” as an expression to humiliate and imply weakness.

The struggle of not complying with defined gender roles and their expectations is also illustrated in “Remember the Alamo,” this time from a male perspective. Rudy, a queer Chicano man suffering with AIDS, has made an alternate personality, Tristán. Tristán is the idealized version of Rudy, idealized because he does not have to live an in-between life, and does not have to deal with Chicano gender expectations. Interestingly, while going to extreme lengths to find a way to fit in, Rudy also perpetuates the very gender expectations he tries to escape through language and thoughts. Similarly in “Never Marry a Mexican”, Clemencia finds herself in the borderlands not fitting into any category of gender, class or ethnicity. This is because of Clemencia’s connection with her own sexuality has led her to suffer society’s sanctions for La Malinche’s betrayal. The result of these sanctions is that she has become genderless.

Contrasting with the main character’s struggles in these stories are the characters surrounding them, whom the main characters generally view as having easily navigated gender roles and expectations. This Cisneros’s main focus on those who do not fit in, becomes juxtaposed with the surrounding characters who do fit in. Through the analysis of these short stories as a whole, we can see that struggles of navigating gender roles and expectations are prominent in the Chicana/o culture, but that these roles and expectations are often propagated and encouraged by the very people who struggle with them.

The depictions of sexuality in *Woman Hollering Creek* are perhaps more diverse than the ones of gender roles. There is shame and suppression depicted in “Remember the Alamo,” and sexual embrace and aggression in “Never Marry a Mexican.” A more sinister depiction is present in “One Holy Night,” where the main character’s lack of sexual education puts her in a vulnerable position, enabling her to be taken advantage of, and leads to a great disappointment immediately, and more dire consequences in the long term. “Never Marry a

Mexican” and “One Holy Night” also introduce the subject of the Chicana woman taking control of her sexual desire.

The common themes in these stories are the difficulty of combining sexuality with gender roles, and how they are inherently intertwined. Viewing these stories together allows us to pinpoint the underlying issues with sexuality in the Chicana/o culture, where it seems difficult to talk about, and to combine with traditional gender roles.

In this thesis, I have identified that due to its unusual form, most critics have avoided discussing genre when analyzing *Woman Hollering Creek*. Moreover, I have shown that *Woman Hollering Creek* is not just a collection of short stories, but a short story cycle with unifying traits that invites a holistic reading of how all the stories add meaning to each other. And finally, through my thematic analysis of *Woman Hollering Creek* as a representation of the short story cycle, I have shown that it is uniquely suited to handle fragmented identity markers, and themes of identity that may resist unification. Through its openness allows for the space needed to portray a multiplicity that is not forced to cohere, thus it gives a more nuanced and realistic representation of the struggle for a Chicana/o identity.

My thesis is limited to working with only one primary source, which makes my argument somewhat weaker than if I could have investigated how themes of identity are treated in two short stories cycles. To investigate themes of identity in a wider range of short story cycles, possibly about other marginalized groups navigating borderlands would be an interesting area for further research.

This diversity of identities with its inherent contradictions is something a hegemonic genre like the novel would be able to to portray. A linear, and coherent develop of identity would not fit the stories of a marginalized and intersectional identity. The multiplicity of being Chicana/o with a mestiza/o identity demands the possibilities for contradictions from the genre, it demands the possibility for lack of resolution, and for stagnation, and finally it demands the tension of the many and the one story, to tell the story of a people living in the borderlands geographically, cultural, sexually, and religiously. To unify the Mayan, the Mexican and the Anglo American into one coherent whole, there needs to be a genre that has room for all three parts. By utilizing the short story genre, Cisneros is in *Woman Hollering Creek* able to show the diversity and complexity that is a Chicana/o through all the separate

short stories, but by organizing them in a cycle there is also a demand that they deserve to be seen as a whole without the exclusion elements of identity and stories that may initially resist coherence and unification. They all belong.

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