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Subverting the Telenovela: Redefining Gender in Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek" and Islas's *The Rain God*

Marina Malli

This paper examines the works of two Mexican American writers, Sandra Cisneros and Arturo Islas, and the way they can be read through the popular genre of the telenovela. Given that the central position of the telenovela in Mexican American popular culture and the way it ascribes gender roles from a patriarchal viewpoint, "Woman Hollering Creek" reforms the structure of the telenovela, giving the genre a feminist approach. Cisneros transforms Mexican American popular culture in an attempt to feminize the society as a whole. Similarly, The Rain God may also be seen through the prism of the telenovela. This reading helps to understand the novel as a critique of the traditional family structure. By focusing on adulterous heterosexual relationships, the novel challenges the discourse of heteronormativity as it exposes the potential disloyalty and sinfulness of patriarchal heterosexual families.

The telenovela is a genre most are familiar with, regardless of cultural background; it has been the sine qua non of Mexican popular culture for many decades. This immensely popular form of entertainment is the most widespread form of melodrama. In recent years has become popular outside of Mexico and Latin America in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Ana Uribe writes that the Mexican telenovela has been exported to about one hundred countries (33), while Melixa Abad-Izquierdo maintains that telenovelas became Mexico's favorite pastime as early as the 1950s and 1960s (93).

According to Uribe, the Mexican telenovela reproduces the values of Mexican society: the nuclear family is presented as a social model, while Catholicism and the worship of La Virgen de Guadalupe are emphasized (132). Uribe points to the melodrama as a central element in defining Mexican national character that historically has been present in many genres in the Mexican culture, one of them being the telenovela (60). She also states that telenovelas contribute to the formation of Mexico as an imagined community (borrowing the term from Benedict Anderson) as they provide social unity through shared beliefs and values (56). Furthermore, Uribe underlines that in Mexican telenovelas the love affair is always central, with the family used as a model of an ideal society and as a factor of social cohesion. She also emphasizes the sexual conservatism present in the genre and the stereotypical, "machista"

representation of women, who are either virgins or already married, and who are completely faithful and devoid of sexual desire; they are devoted to and identify with the La Virgen de Guadalupe (69). Melixa Abad-Izquierdo also discusses this stereotypical representation of genre. She writes that the traditional plot of the telenovelas during the 1960s and 70s maintains “a *puta/virgen* dichotomy.” She continues,

Characters were Manichean with female roles constantly replicating the *puta/virgen* dichotomy, while male characters were very masculine in appearance but often weak in character and easy to manipulate. Often the plots revolved around a love triangle. This triangle featured either two male suitors competing for a woman or two women competing for the love of a man. In the latter triangle, the women were represented either as the ‘good’ virginal maid or the ‘bad’ *femme fatale* In the end, the ‘good’ and ‘love’ triumphed over evil and the good woman always got the man. (98-9)

This stereotypical plot and patriarchal gender roles make their appearance in Arturo Islas’s novel *The Rain God* in the chapter “Compadres and Comadres,” to which I will later devote my attention.

Concerning the appearance of the telenovela genre in the writings of Chicanas/os, a number of scholars have published pertinent studies. Eva Fernández de Pinedo Echevarría writes about the significance of the telenovela in Chican@ writing and the representation of the genre in literary works by Chicanos/as. She recognizes the important role of the telenovela in Mexican American culture as well as its contribution to the formation of a national identity. She writes, “The representation of Mexican popular culture is currently the focus of much Chicano/a writing. In the work of Gloria Anzaldúa or Sandra Cisneros art forms, such as folk stories, are articulated as counter-narratives to official versions of history and culture, as well

as expressions that assert a Chicano/Mexican culture.” She continues by saying that “in the work of some Chicano writers, *telenovelas* are posited as a vital part of Chicanos’ transnational identity, suggesting that this popular genre should be perceived as something more significant than a television serial” (126). Apart from Fernández, Belkys Torres discusses the use of the popular genre in the writings of Chicanas/os, who have adapted the genre, creating “hybrid text[s].” She elaborates, “Some recent narratives either read like telenovelas or parody the genre, creating a hybrid text impossible to define as either ‘purely’ literature or serialized melodrama, and in fact are best referred to as teleNOVELa” (200). Torres refers to writers Sandra Benitez, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros and Eduardo Santiago, and specifically to Castillo’s *So Far from God*, which “employs a unique adaptation of telenovelas to engender a hybrid narrative which is neither serialized melodrama nor ‘high’ literature”; this is what Torres calls “teleNOVELa” (207-8). I discuss this kind of hybridity and incorporation of popular culture elements as well as the re-inscription of popular culture as a whole in the writings of Cisneros and Islas.

In this paper, I look at the works of the two Mexican American writers through the prism of the Mexican telenovela. My point is that aspects of the Mexican telenovela are present in the writings of Chicanos/as, who have utilized and reformed the genre. I argue that “Woman Hollering Creek” by Cisneros and *The Rain God* by Islas both incorporate elements of the telenovela, and that they employ the genre in order to challenge gender ideology embedded in Mexican popular culture. They do this in distinct ways: “Woman Hollering Creek” serves to reform the structure of the telenovela, thus giving the genre a feminist approach. *The Rain God*, on the other hand, challenges the view of homosexual relationships being sinful as it exposes the potential disloyalty and sinfulness of patriarchal heterosexual families.

“Woman Hollering Creek”: A Feminist Telenovela

Cisneros's short story "Woman Hollering Creek" has been analyzed by many critics as a feminist transformation of the legend of La Llorona, the weeping woman (Wyatt; Doyle; Phelan; Simerka; Saldívar-Hull). Cisneros reclaims the figure of La Llorona for women by transforming the icon from a weeping woman to a hollering woman. In this way, she reconfigures Mexican American mythology in order to counteract the patriarchal discourse inherent in it. Cisneros's story alters the image of the passive wailing woman who is the embodiment of failed motherhood into a hollering, vibrant woman, who is not afraid to break conventions and take charge of her life without a man.

In terms of the popular genre, the plot of the short story could be easily imagined as a telenovela since it resembles the "Cinderella story" now commonly associated with telenovelas (Abad-Izquierdo 102-3). In "Woman Hollering Creek" the reader is presented with a pitiful character found in a miserable situation, which she cannot escape, and the reader is called to empathize with her. The protagonist, Cleófilas, is a Mexican woman who is tricked into marrying a man who lives on the other side of the border, who is believed to have a good job and a considerable amount of money, and who promises her a life like she saw on television:

Seguín, Tejas. A nice sterling ring to it. The tinkle of money. She would get to wear outfits like the women on the *tele*, like Lucía Méndez. And would have a lovely house, and wouldn't Chela be jealous . . . He has a very important position in Seguin . . . New paint and new furniture. Why not? He can afford it (45).

However, when Cleófilas goes to Texas with her new husband, she realizes that life is not as ideal as she had expected, as her husband does not have a nice job or a nice house. Instead, the protagonist is placed in a poor house with "doorways without doors" and with a husband that beats her (49). Cleófilas contemplates the hopelessness of her situation and she rejects the idea of going back to her father's house because of the shame her return would bring (50). The

protagonist falls under the category of the poor girl in need to be saved, and her passivity along with the dramatic aspect are elements of the telenovela that the story uses. “Woman Hollering Creek” expresses the ideals Ana Uribe associates with the Mexican telenovela, namely, the centrality of the patriarchal family and the obedience of the female protagonist. Cleófilas is the stereotype of the good wife; she is passive and faithful, and does not react or strike back when Juan Pedro hits her. She submits to male authority, and continues to tend to her wifely duties: cleaning the house, cooking, and “chang[ing] the baby’s Pampers” (49). She becomes a kind of martyr who endures male domination while fulfilling the role society has assigned to her.

Richard T. Rodríguez claims that “the archetypal Chicana would necessarily provide a feminine spirit of maternal consolation (in spite of her suffering) while ensuring the procreation . . .” (2).

Cleófilas complies with the idea of passive domesticity¹ and with the image of the suffering mother who satisfies everybody’s needs but her own. At the same time, in the context of the melodrama, she is a kind of Cinderella awaiting the prince who will save her from the villain. In the story, Cleófilas’ doctor also exclaims her surprise at Cleófilas’ life resembling “a regular soap opera” and adds, “*Qué vida, comadre*” (55).

There are a number of additional aspects of “Woman Hollering Creek” that facilitate the association of the short story with a telenovela. First, the connection is created in the mind of the reader as the protagonist often draws a parallel between her life and the lives of the women in the telenovelas. There is frequent reference to telenovelas and the major role they play in Cleófilas’ life as well as to another popular genre that favors the melodrama, the romantic novel. In the short story, the reader can see the importance of the telenovela in the life of women of Mexican descent, especially those of the working class. When Cleófilas lived in Mexico, one of her few sources of entertainment was the telenovela, which also contributed to the formation of her social identity and raised her expectations about passion and romantic love

(44). When Cleófilas goes to the U.S. her wish to watch her telenovelas to remind herself of home and to escape from her bleak everyday life is not granted as her husband does not own a TV set. Cleófilas can only visit her neighbor Soledad to catch a few glimpses of the telenovelas. Cleófilas herself associates her life with a telenovela: “Cleófilas thought her life would have to be like that, like a *telenovela*, only now the episodes got sadder and sadder” (52). Besides, the only women that have served as role models she could identify with were those she saw in the telenovelas, especially since her mother was deceased (45). In this way, her life mirrors a telenovela, and the reader of the short story becomes the anxious TV viewer who longs for a better life for Cleófilas.

A second aspect that links the story with the telenovela is the protagonist’s name. When Cleófilas compares her life to a telenovela, she is disappointed with her unpoetic name, and she thinks that if she were to be a protagonist of a telenovela she would have to change her name to “Topazio, or Yesenia, Cristal . . . something more poetic than Cleófilas” (53). However, her unique name prevents her from being lost in the crowd, and separates her as an individual. The name *Cleófilas* has a Greek origin and it means “he who loves glory.”² In fact, names in “Woman Hollering Creek” are not without significance. Cleófilas’ neighbors are named Dolores and Soledad, and these characters are indeed alone and suffering. On the other hand, the name of Cleófilas’s doctor, Graciela, and of Felice denotes happiness, as their bearers are independent women, who have escaped the traditional repressive role of women. This leads us to believe that Cleófilas is not an ordinary girl; her name gives poor Cleófilas heroic dimensions, making her a woman with potential and not one of many. Cleófilas is the kind of woman of whom stories are written. The fact that a male name is used for the protagonist could be seen as an attempt to redefine gender through a feminist interpretation of heroism.

Thirdly, “Woman Hollering Creek” is a short story that is meant to be easily read and understood and to speak to hearts of the readers, much like a telenovela. Sandra Cisneros in her introduction to *The House on Mango Street* claims that she did not mean for her writing to be difficult to read; she talks about herself as a writer, “she doesn't want to write a book that a reader won't understand and would feel ashamed for not understanding” (xvii). She also dedicates her writings to women (Doyle 53). The short story is then mostly directed towards women much like telenovelas are.

Nevertheless, Cisneros reconfigures the genre by offering an unconventional ending to her “telenovela.” Instead of the customary happy ending with a wedding, the short story offers a more realistic resolution in which Cleófilas is “saved” not by a man but by another woman: Felice takes Cleófilas in her pick-up truck and drives her to San Antonio so she can leave her abusive husband and return to her family in Mexico. In this way, the text replaces masculine power with female solidarity; it stresses the independence of women and their ability to save themselves without the assistance of a man. Uribe points to the existence of moral justice in the Mexican telenovela, in which good triumphs over evil (68). In this case the evil villain – Cleófilas' husband – is “defeated” by women working together for each other. It is significant that the plan to save Cleófilas is not conceived or realized by a man, but by two women. Furthermore, Sonia Saldívar-Hull mentions that Felice “could even be figured as a Chicana lesbian” (106-7). This idea is reinforced by the fact that Felice has no husband, drives a pick-up truck, and curses, while Cleófilas says she is “like no woman she'd ever met” (56). Felice plays the role of the prince and substitutes man in the “happy ending” of the story, so her view as a lesbian is plausible; however, I do not think that there is a need to specify Felice's sexuality. Maylei Blackwell tells us of how women who participated in the Chicano movement of the 1960s were branded as lesbians if they challenged gender stereotypes (71). Even though I do

not suggest that Saldívar-Hull intended this, it could imply that all independent women who can afford to buy their own cars and are not married are lesbians or that women can have power only when identifying with men and assuming male roles. Felice is a feminist in practice and crosses gender boundaries, whether she is a lesbian or not.

My claim is that Cisneros's text does not only transform Mexican folklore which promotes oppressive ideals and models of conduct for women, such as the legend of La Llorona, but also feminizes Mexican popular culture by offsetting the patriarchal elements present in the telenovela. Fernández de Pinedo recognizes that in the story "telenovelas are posited as one of many narratives that comply with the dominant ideology" (130). In addition, Sonia Saldívar-Hull observes how popular culture along with mythology unite in order to dominate Mexican women: "[i]n the cuento, ideological manipulation through mass media – the romance novel, the fotonovela (photo novel) and the telenovela (soap opera) – as well as through the male construction of woman in the folk figure of La Llorona collude to keep women submissive" (106). Cisneros in her story works to undermine both these agents of subordination. Many critics I have already mentioned have elaborated on the ways La Llorona is viewed from a feminist angle, and the model of a passive, wailing woman is transformed into an active, hollering woman that takes charge of her life. Barbara Simerka claims that Sandra Cisneros along with other Chicana writers "offer a compelling vision of the rites of passage which Chicanas undergo as they seek to gain control of the cultural imagery that plays a critical role in defining and determining their lives and the lives of all marginalized groups" (56-7). The telenovela is – as mentioned above – an essential part of Mexican culture, and is yet another aspect of the cultural imagery that Chicanas seek to take over. "Woman Hollering Creek" is a type of feminist telenovela that overthrows the conventions found in the genre and challenges the view that women's sole purpose is getting married and having children, and that is the only

“happy ending” they can expect. Cisneros’s writings attempt to counteract the sexist discourse located in the whole array of cultural production and feminize the means of identity construction and, among them, the telenovela, which is one of the factors that help to shape Mexican and Mexican American identity. Finally, Saldívar-Hull points out that the ending of the story “offer[s] . . . the possibility of social change through communal female solidarity” (117). By using a genre the reader is familiar with and writing in a style that is easily comprehensible, the short story has a social role of speaking to women – Chicanas, Mexicanas, and all women in general – and giving them an alternative to the story they are used to hear. The story urges them to alter their way of thinking about themselves and about their roles as women.

In a relevant study, James Phelan further argues that “Cisneros writes an anti-telenovela” (228). He claims that Cisneros’s “high art” counteracts the discourse of mass-produced television serials. Phelan explains that Cisneros’s writings differ from the telenovelas in different ways; for example in the short story *Cleófilas* performs a circle and “ends where she began.” This stasis is juxtaposed to the constant change in telenovelas (228). He concludes that “In this way, Cisneros fights fictions of the mass media with her own, high cultural narrative” (224). My argument is not that far from this. I also suggest that Cisneros utilizes the modes of popular culture in order to counteract the ideas present in it. She creates a feminist telenovela, which, for the same reasons, functions as an anti-telenovela, i.e. an example of high art that invalidates the patriarchal narratives of popular culture.

The Rain God and the Patriarchal Family

Islas’s *The Rain God* seems to be more concerned with the formation of identity of Chicanos rather than Chicanas. Men’s sexuality, social and familial roles are located in the center of the narrative. It is no surprise, then, that the majority of literary critics would focus on the

characters of Miguel Chico and Felix, and discuss issues of homosexuality and its disapproval by the Mexican American family. In my paper, I focus on a slightly different aspect of the novel and I argue that the text uses the telenovela in a different way than “Woman Hollering Creek.” Not unlike Cisneros’s story, *The Rain God* employs the popular genre to challenge gender roles in the Mexican American society, and also to expose the discrimination against homosexual Chicanos and their exclusion from la familia.

The Rain God is a novel in which the narrator Miguel Chico begins to tell the story of his family and its “sinners” (4). It is composed of six chapters dedicated to the “sins” of the Angel family members, thus making the novel a sort of family saga; however, it is much more than just a historical novel (Márquez 4-5). The title of first chapter, “Judgment Day,” suggests the critical eye Miguel Chico will have in reminiscing about the members of his family and their comportment. Each chapter is dedicated to a different tale that comprises the history of the Angel family. A central episode in the novel is described in the chapter “Rain Dancer,” in which Miguel Chico’s homosexual uncle, Felix, is murdered by a young soldier whom he tries to seduce in a desperate attempt to express his sexuality. Felix’s family – with the exception of his daughter Lena – refuses to seek justice for his murder out of fear of having his homosexuality revealed. What is more, Lena’s voice is silenced by her uncle and Felix’s brother, Miguel Grande. After Felix’s death, the reader watches as Felix’s son JoEl becomes a drug addict and his life deteriorates. Felix is a crucial character in the novel that is used as a device through which Miguel Chico expresses his own homosexuality. Another central character is Miguel Chico’s grandmother, known as Mama Chona. She is the family’s matriarch and the carrier of tradition and propriety. In the final chapter of the novel, “The Rain God,” Felix makes a spectral appearance as the Rain God in Mama Chona’s deathbed. Mama Chona takes him in her arms and symbolically restores the fallen member of the Angel family as she whispers “La

familia” (180). In this way, the family of “sinners” is reunited in the end and all its members accepted and embraced by the matriarch.

Islas’s novel has been seen as a critique of Chicano nationalism and its exclusion of some of its members, such as the homosexuals and the disabled (Minich 697-700). The novel is viewed as an attempt to incorporate marginalized Chicanos into *la familia* (703). Moreover, John Alba Cutler argues that the character Felix is the surrogate for Miguel Chico’s sexuality, and that Miguel Chico serves as a surrogate for Islas’s sexuality (15, 19). Cutler also sees Felix’s murder as “a kind of ritual sacrifice” for the sins of the whole community (16). Most critics have focused on the characters of Miguel Chico and Felix, and the inclusions and exclusions of Mexican American family and society (Minich; Cutler; Ortíz; Jesús Vega).

Considering that the theme of homosexuality is central to the novel, it is expected that the majority of critical reception would focus on the chapters that refer to Miguel Chico and Felix. Consequently, less attention has been paid to the story of Miguel Chico’s parents. The chapter “Compadres and Comadres” is the third and longest chapter of the book and it tells the story of Miguel Grande’s affair with Lola, his wife Juanita’s best friend. The scenario is rather commonplace and is in accordance with the traditional love triangle theme Melixa Abad-Izquierdo identifies in Mexican telenovelas of the 1960s and 1970s (98-9). Miguel Grande cheats on his wife with her best friend. When he is discovered, he promises to set himself straight and make amends, but he returns to his lover. His wife Juanita considers leaving him, yet she mostly misses her best friend than feels betrayed. At the end of the chapter Juanita stays with her husband, while jokingly admitting that she is indeed “too good to be true” (110).

While the whole body of the novel could be read as a telenovela as it presents the full spectrum of a family melodrama with intriguing stories of love affairs, illegitimate children, homosexuality, murder, and drug abuse, “Compadres and Comadres” is the most lighthearted

story with a very commonly exploited theme that truly reminds the reader of the plot of a telenovela. In fact, Sonia Saldívar-Hull analyzes a fotonovela published in *¡Casos Reales!* that has a similar plot, in which the woman remains faithful to her repeatedly cheating husband, and decides to devote herself to her children and to her role as a mother (110-4). Saldívar-Hull uses this example to emphasize the patriarchal stereotypes embedded in popular genres, like the fotonovela or the telenovela. Apart from the melodrama and stereotypical plot, another element of the telenovela found in Islas's novel is the strong presence of Catholicism, greatly manifested in the character of Mama Chona and her preoccupation with purity and sin.

A major aspect of Mexican culture present in the telenovela that is also present in *The Rain God* is the family. Many critics have emphasized the significance of the notion of the family. Richard T. Rodríguez's *Next of Kin* is an excellent study of the representations of la familia in Mexican American culture and the way it determines societal structures. La familia possesses powerful imagery and assigns roles to individuals: the man is the father and head of the family/society and the woman is the mother who is subservient to the father. Motherhood is emphasized and appears to be the major – if not the only – role of Mexican women. Cherríe Moraga stresses that the Virgin “represented the Mexican ideal of ‘la madre sufrida,’ the long-suffering desexualized Indian mother, and Malinche was ‘la chingada,’ sexually stigmatized by her transgression of ‘sleeping with the enemy,’ Hernán Cortez” (*Last Generation* 157). This dichotomy can be very clearly seen in *The Rain God* with Juanita as la Virgen and Lola as la Malinche. Juanita is the epitome of the good Mexican wife, who stays loyal to her husband, withstands his infidelities, and – most importantly – keeps the family together. Lola, on the other hand, is the promiscuous woman with no moral constraints. She is the femme fatale who breaks down households and controls her lovers. Both female characters are particularly flat and stereotypical, and remain static, while the title of the chapter, “Compadres and Comadres,”

suggests that this is the typical relationship between men and women. *The Rain God* would appear to reproduce the conservative and patriarchal discourse found in the telenovela; nevertheless, this viewpoint is refuted if one takes into consideration the following observations.

Family imagery is essential to the culture; however, it does not only serve as model behavior for its members, but also it marginalizes those individuals who do not or choose not to observe it. A group of people who seem not to “fit” in the traditional patriarchal family are homosexuals. Cherríe Moraga emphasizes the exclusionary tendency of the Mexican family. She notes that Chicano gay men are more marginalized and more susceptible to violence as they are deemed inferior by a culture that celebrates machismo. Homosexual men, and especially those with a more effeminate appearance, cannot fulfill the role of the macho and therefore are not able to project the typical Chicano identity and be admitted into the society. Since *la familia* is a concept that contributes to the distribution of roles among the members of the society, homosexual men, who do not fulfill their role as the father/head of the family, fall out of the category of “men” in the Chicano community. As Moraga puts it, “lesbians and gay men were not envisioned as members of ‘the house’” (*Last Generation* 159); the family cannot include members that do not carry out their assigned roles. It is significant that in the novel Miguel Grande’s “sins” are more or less socially acceptable, if not somewhat expected. This is another manifestation of machismo inside the family. The narrator comments that “the family chose to ignore [his sins] because it relied on him during all crises” (4). Nevertheless, Felix’s “sins” are a taboo, and are so unacceptable by society that the family even refuses to seek justice for his murder, lest his sexuality is revealed to the public. Felix seems to become trapped in the machista family structure. Felix is married with children, not unlike Miguel Grande himself. He has to fulfill – even though superficially – his role as a man and protector of the family. He

works to bring in money, and he is a good husband and father. Nevertheless, the conventional societal structure does not allow Felix to express his sexuality, and causes him not only to pretend, but also to turn to dangerous sexual behavior that eventually leads him to his death. The novel makes it clear that, out of all the family “sinners,” Felix is the most socially shunned, thus making homosexuality the utmost horrible and absolutely unforgivable act. Critics have argued that homosexuality is so unacceptable in a Mexican family that even the narrator, Miguel Chico, does not openly admit to it, but only hints it through his association with Felix. Manuel de Jesús Vega comments that Chicano gay men can only vaguely refer to their sexuality. He says, “It is no secret that in Latino culture fear of the stigma of homosexuality is a powerful deterrent. Patriarchal gender relations and established family values directly militate against the emergence and acceptance of a gay identity” (112).

The chapter “Compadres and Comadres” serves to counteract this heteronormative discourse by emphasizing the failure of the patriarchal family even in heterosexual relationships. While the chapter could appear to reaffirm the values and ideals imbedded in the telenovelas, a more careful reading of the chapter in association with the rest of the novel and its characters reveals the chapter for what it is, a critique. Islas utilizes the telenovela genre in order to expose and criticize the culture’s attitudes towards gender and proper familial roles. The chapter functions to counteract the discourse of heteronormativity that glorifies heterosexual relationships and imposes them as the only norm. If this notion of heteronormativity is combined with that of *la familia*, it creates the image of an idyllic and romanticized idea of household utopia. *The Rain God* seeks to repudiate this ideal. The patriarchal family is malfunctioning and it harbors betrayal and emotional pain for its members. Rodríguez writes that the family is viewed as a “romanticized haven” that protects its members from the outer world (1). This exposure of the imperfect patriarchal family in combination with an extreme intolerance for

homosexuality that reaches the point of not punishing murder, acts as a critique of the patriarchal family. Islas's writings use the means and sources of the culture with the purpose of critiquing it. In this way, he subverts the telenovela and opens the way for a reevaluation of the culture and inclusion of all its members, including gay Chicanos.

Islas enters the discussion among other Chicanos/as who have attempted to queer heteronormative narratives and patriarchal family structures in order to make way for a broader and all-encompassing Chican@ identity. Such scholars include Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and José Esteban Muñoz, who have dealt with issues of heteronormativity and hybridity in the Mexican American culture. More specifically, Gloria Anzaldúa in her cornerstone *Borderlands/La Frontera* celebrates hybrid identities that are the result of the merging of multiple cultures and identities. On a similar tone, José Esteban Muñoz is concerned with the representation of minority subjects and their own formation of identity that inevitably clashes with normative discourses; "subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny" (5). Cherríe Moraga is also actively engaged in the creation of a more inclusive Chicano identity through her concept of "Queer Aztlán": "A Chicano homeland that could embrace *all* its people, including its *jotería*" (emphasis in the original; *Last Generation* 147). Moraga explores different aspects of identity that separate themselves from prescriptive norms, such as lesbian motherhood in her *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood*. Islas's novel too contributes to this subversion of exclusionary identities. By utilizing the discourse of patriarchy found in the telenovela genre, *The Rain God* works to undermine traditional machista identities, like the one of Miguel Grande. Furthermore, the end of the novel and the symbolic acceptance of Felix in la familia serve to queer the family structure. Finally, the inclusion as well as

subversion of elements of popular culture in the novel itself gives it a hybrid identity that integrates old and new elements of the Chican@ family.

Mexican American Writers Reforming the Culture

My examination of the works of two Mexican American writers demonstrates how the underlying patterns of the culture are evident in their writings. Both Sandra Cisneros's and Arturo Islas's narratives are influenced by and infused with Mexican American popular culture. Even though their writings involve different experiences, they both seem to utilize the telenovela in some way. More importantly, they both attempt to reform the culture by embracing its elements and at the same time fusing them with new constructs and transforming them into new hybrid entities.

It is known that Mexican Americans try to form an identity that is distinct from both Mexican and American, but somehow a combination of the two. In constructing a new identity, people have to respond to the influence coming from the old tradition originating from Mexico, and at the same time need to accept or reject values and attitudes. Both the short story and the novel I have examined deal with characters located – for one reason or another – in-between cultures and are called to choose which elements to keep and which to discard. The telenovela is one of those elements that is created in Mexico and brings with it ideals and perspectives, some of which are exclusive and oppressive to certain groups of Chicanos/as. Writers are, therefore, not only influenced by Mexican American popular culture, but also attempt to change the underlying patterns and ideas found in it. They seek to enhance Mexican American popular culture as well as replace the forms of entertainment and identification for Chicanos and Chicanas. By creating feminist telenovelas, or works that undermine the discourse of the telenovela, Chicano/a writers create a new point of reference for Mexican Americans in particular. They reject the aspects of the Mexican culture that are disadvantageous to some

members of the society, and they help to shape a new popular culture for Chicanas and Chicanos.

Notes

1. The seclusion of the woman in the domestic sphere and her exclusive devotion to the family is particularly relevant to traditional Mexican family structure. “First, women’s social functions and values are encoded and located in private or domestic spaces, which are the spaces of familial and communal reproduction, as opposed to the masculine domination. Second, women are passive social actors whereas men are regarded as active social agents, including, as some commentators suggest, in the sexual sphere” (Allatson 153-4).
2. From Ancient Greek κλέος [cléos] = glory, and φιλό [filó] = love. The masculine name Κλεόφιλος [Cleófilos] exists in Greek. There are numerous Spanish names with a Greek origin, such as Atanacio, “immortal,” or Anastasio, “resurrectional.”

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