

“Watercolor Women”: Configuring the Chicana Female Subject

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Abstract: *Second wave feminism in the United States has brought about new voices of minority communities in the framework of literary studies. Drawing on distinctions among concepts regarding the female experience and on the standpoints of Chicana feminism as both integrative and integral part of postcolonialism, the proposed paper aims at configuring a typology of the female subject in the borderlands. By appealing to a number of literary works by Chicanas, as well as tracing some of the performative aspects of writing “as a Chicana”, the paper formulates a number of instances in which the Chicana female subject is invariably conceptualized (such as la Virgen, la Malinche, la victima, la soldadera, etc.), as well as more abstruse ones such as the threatening woman or the incestuous mistress. Furthermore, the analysis shall shed a light on the recurrence of these conceptualized female subjects within the Chicana literary environment by reasoning that the later justifies both the writers’ intentionality and their commitment to the feminist views of the movement.*

Key words: *Chicana, feminism, female subject, performativity, intentionality*

The primary concern related to the borderland territory might easily be confined to the racial debate, specific to the first and second half of the 20th century, the Mexicans occupying maybe a special place due to their mixture of Indianness, Mexicanness and eventually Americanness. The Chicano/a subject has often been referred to as being a result of this movement across the frontier, inhabiting a place that was once his/her own, and became foreign on paper, but remained rather familiar to generations following the war. That is also why the complex problematic of the female subject in the borderlands territory cannot be strictly separated from that of ethnicity, Chicana women being first and foremost ‘Mexican’ and only afterwards Chicana feminists. It is also why, when trying to identify some of the features of such a subject it is inevitable that the borderlands appear as a guiding element, both physically and metaphysically. The borderland shapes one’s becoming a Chicana and an American citizen, as well as it contributes to a feeling of “unbelongingness” to both countries, North and South of the frontier.

Somehow ignored by the more masculine Chicano movement in their approach to the ethnic status quo of the 60s, the Chicanas acted and reacted as an impulse of revolt. Therefore, the rising of voice for the female subject and the attempt to assume a different power position could be seen in terms of the more “traditional” psycho-social development of the female as “the castrated other”. However, as Chicana feminists themselves argue (Perez), this initial self-positioning as an inferior subject is what needed to be surpassed in order to be able to “speak-up” in the Mexican American community and further assume a different one. It is also the reason why Chicana feminists do not really resonate with the white feminists of the time, but rather with other voices coming from marginal spaces (such as the black or the immigrant ones).

‘Textbook’ feminism (if we consider it a synonym of the white feminism) treats the concept of ‘woman’ not as a matter of individual gender consciousness but as a political category. ‘Femaleness’ is a cultural construction created to counter oppressive male images of women; this concept functions as the basis for the social, economic and political betterment of women. Some feminists attack the psychoanalytic preference for a fragmented female subject, which is seen as free to reconstitute itself in new and liberated forms.

As a result the female subject is treated distinctively and the literary forms in which it develops are consequently strikingly different as well: ethnic feminism prefers a type of writing that represents the self as fractured and fragmented rather than the realist texts with a clear sociological context preferred by non-ethnically bound feminism.

It becomes thus imperative for the Chicana to construct a feminist voice for the women of color with which to speak to white women as well as men. Gloria Anzaldúa

explains the manner in which Chicanas are oppressed by the cultural imperative that women remain silent, unquestioning, invisible, within traditional Chicano culture; even the language that is available to these women expresses masculine rather than feminine consciousness: 'Chicanas use *nostros* whether we're male or female. We are robbed of female being by the masculine plural' (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 54).

Hence, aside from being an oppressed subject in the male-female opposition of the community, the Chicana also face the issue of speaking from a discredited cultural position, in a literary environment that has been established and devised to express the lives and thoughts of men (may they be colored or white) and white (only) women. Therefore, the construction of the female subject of the borderlands follows some strategies to respond these issues, among which the attempt to re-design inherited stereotypes, the construction of an alternative literary tradition and the challenge of conventional distinctions among literary forms of expression could be mentioned. Furthermore, by an enactment of what has been called the 'border feminism' Chicanas also put forth the issue of performativity, in that taxonomy of female subject positions is configured through their both theoretic and literary practice.

In her *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* (2000), Deborah Madsen argues that Chicana feminists are somewhere in between the socialist and psychoanalytic trends – that is they focus both on the social consequences of being an oppressed subject, all the while seeking to produce a third space of imagination, through their fiction writing.

This space, referred to by Gloria Anzaldúa as *nepantla* is what actually defines, in her view, the female experience of the Chicana: "the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic tenets inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures" ("now let us shift" 548). Anzaldúa's definition of the female subject as *nepantlera* or as a *mestiza* ("carrying all five races") is taken further by Ana Castillo in her *Massacre of the Dreamers*, by introducing the term *Xicanista*, to stand for the politically aware female subject, in search of a voice, all the while preserving the somehow individualistic perspective and foregrounding the concern for the self.

The introduction of all these apparently striking terms functions as a re-configuring of the female subject in the borderlands, previously and traditionally associated with stereotypes of feminine psychoanalysis. The Chicana theoretical framework stands on the grounds of the previously mentioned revolt towards the stereotypical construction of the female as the "other", with its subsequent modifiers – "the castrated", "the colored", "the banished-from-heaven", "the submissive", basically, "the inferior". Furthermore, some Chicanas¹ even distance themselves from the colonial/postcolonial framework, while introducing a third, the decolonial, as the imaginary through which history could be re-written by paying particular attention to the experience of the marginalized, "that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are organized" and the imaginary "conjures fragmented identities, fragmented realities, that are 'real,' but a real that is in question" (Perez, 1999:6).

And the Chicana/feminine identity is such a marginalized instance. This marginalized position, both in the psycho-social background of the community and the Western literary tradition, has always placed the Chicana female subject under various labels. It is in fact these labels that the Chicana feminists have to deal with, before and while introducing 'the decolonial'.

The Freudian well-known concept of the 'castration complex' is challenged primarily by feminists, regardless of their racial attributes, as it constitutes one of the first instances of male intellectual discriminative positions. Although largely debated upon by recent psychology, Freud's theory of feminine sexuality² focuses on gender differentiation through the castration complex that the female manifests towards the masculine, from the earliest stages of development. The female subject is, in Freudian psychology, the 'castrated Other',

lacking a penis and envying the man for having one, a denominator that has raised numerous debates within the psychological environment, as well as the realm of cultural studies, of which Lacan's intervention³ is noteworthy to the evolution of the Chicana performance of the female subject.

Lacan's assessment comes against Freud's biologicistic readings in that it places an emphasis on the linguistic consciousness involved in establishing gender. In this way, gender identity is no longer rooted in nature (as was the case in Freud's theory) but rather in the constitutive force of language. Gender, in Lacanian terms, is a product of fantasy, a cultural structure that determines sexuality. He acknowledges the situation of the female subjects in a patriarchal culture and society as "unnecessary subjugation", and unlike Freud, focuses on the idea that a male/female hierarchy perpetuates itself without being mandated by a biologically determined inferiority. Women in Lacan's view are no longer castrated, but fall under the males' illusion of power (represented by the phallus). But even if Lacan recognizes the fantasy dimension of sexual difference, he still emphasizes the power of gender structures to give significance to the reality that women live in, and perpetuate it. However, the definition of women as 'lack' is perpetuated in a way, as the focus shifts from 'lacking the penis' to lacking power over the phallus.

Derrida, on the other hand, emphasizes the political significance of the way in which sexuality does not always match perfectly the gender identity. He argues that gender and sex are not identical and it is through the "performative" power of language that the woman "cannot be imprisoned in the current definitions of herself as lack, as the castrated other" (Cornell, 1992: 285). The 'definition' of the female subject as designed by the 'superior' gender, perpetuates as long as linguistic performances are re-enacted in relation to sexuality, in similar contexts. As later argued by Cornell, 'sexual identity' becomes in the context of these revisions a "cultural construction [...] which can only justify itself by an appeal to past history" (289).

The fact that the male subject was rigidly fixed in the common understanding as superior to the female subject is a result of not only the impositions of tradition, but also of the recognition of the latter as justified and 'scientifically' explainable, a characteristic which both Freud and Lacan have contributed to. In this way, the 'castration complex' might be considered to have become, throughout the scientific praise that Freud has received, an almost involuntary response to gender differentiation, a reflex.

But while Derrida struggles to deconstruct the 'arbitrary dichotomous categories' of male and female, Judith Butler offers another analysis of identity from a poststructuralist view that is helpful in discussing Chicana rewritings of gender (Butler, 1990). Instead of seeing gender identity as a result of linguistic construction, she brings forth the ideas of agency and performance, defining gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts"(33). Her aim is to justify the assumption according to which female identity is self-stylized, and that by repeated acts/performances it creates the illusion of an essentialized identity. What is even more important for the analysis of Chicana female subject is the fact that Butler relates performance to an "act of conscious affiliation", rather than natural reasons.

"The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler, 1990:142).

Butler's concept of gender performance could therefore be extrapolated to a series of 'deeds' that involve the construction of a specific identity, even though that identity is fragmented in itself. The 'doers' perform the fragmentation in order to render explicit their discontent with the other's performances, perpetuated by history and repetition. Performing as Chicanas, the

feminists deny the Freudian assumptions of inferiority just as much as they make a political statement of self-determination. Although they might perform their true selves (if that notion could still be maintained without essentialising it), the Chicanas do it in a mediated manner, consciously assuming the role language and previous situations have in shaping their current being. The female subject in the borderlands responds to the historical moment and the way in which it has been conceptualized by others by wearing the mask of fragmentary identity and by employing a set of strategies that further perpetuate that fragmentariness. The Chicana writers and theorists employ thus a set of female subject positions of which some are performed in response to the phallogentric order, while others are performed in an undisclosed manner, so as to contribute to the complexity of instances the feminine can manifest in. To this purpose, they employ a set of images, ‘drags’ in Butler’s terms, which may constitute a taxonomy of female subject positions characteristic to the Chicana environment.

In order to sustain the extent to which these categories respond to the previously mentioned ‘dichotomous categories’, it is however, inevitably to also look at the male configuration of the topic. Although the Chicano movement is primarily concerned with the ethnic polarization of the American society and culture, and hence the marginalization of minority subjects, there are tendencies to include or to exclude the gender performance, depending on the identity assumed at a particular moment. The male configurations of identity inevitably respond, in their turn, to the development of feminist theories within the Mexican-American environment, and while some preserve, in a ‘traditional’ manner the stereotypic female imagery, others tend to incorporate a different approach to femaleness, as they (un)willingly portray instances of empowered women.

In this context of Chicano and Chicana performances of identity, to place them together would not only help express the affiliations they establish in performing the Mexican-American identity, but also the assumption that gender differentiation is not necessarily bound to dissipate one, but rather to help perform both. As Mexican-American identity in general, and the female subjectivity in particular, is constructed on the bases of fragmentation, the slash in ‘Chicano/a’ is actually a unifying principle, however paradoxical that may sound, in that it places an emphasis on the “infinite divisions”⁴ that might actually unite.

Without purporting to the exhaustive, the discussion of the female encounters in the Chicano/a literary environment could encompass a number of recurring images. On the one hand, they serve the previously exposed principle of identity performance, aiming to establish themselves as counter-prototypes to the male dominated tradition. On the other, some of them are inferred from the constant preoccupation of female authors predominantly to issue a new terminology to define and identify the Chicana.

In this respect, Maria Herrera-Sobek’s *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (1990), based on more than three thousand *corridos* (which are considered the most traditional and representative forms of artistic expression in the Chicano environment) explores five major female archetypes: the Good Mother, the Terrible Mother, the Virgin of Guadalupe, The Lover—both faithful and treacherous— and the Soldadera. Most of these archetypes represent both positive (Good Mother, Virgin of Guadalupe, Faithful Lover) and negative (Terrible Mother, Treacherous Lover – La Llorona, La Malinche) examples of feminine prototypes that have influenced the general and (self)perception of women in the borderlands. The last one, however, reconfigures “positive female behavior” to include political agency in the form of armed struggle for the revolution. It is this *soldadera*, somehow portrayed by the corridos as a possible feminine instance that occupies most of her study, in order to show that the gender roles assigned by the patriarchal system allow for a certain praise of the woman who goes beyond traditional gender roles, even within the male-dominated community. However, she goes on to explore the ways in which this incipient form

of liberation is dealt with by male authors, apparently abandoned by strongly oriented social ones (such as Luis Valdez's portrayal of women as voiceless others) and concluding that both traditional and non-traditional gender roles are based on the assumption of heterosexuality, which generates oppression on multiple levels: as members of a minority group, as females, and as inheritors of a culture that tends to be dominated by males. In a performance of authorship, Herrera-Sobeck manages to take one first step in issuing a taxonomy of the female presence in the borderlands, all the while providing the comparative approach of 'traditional' and postmodern analysis.

When expanding this taxonomy of the female subject positions in the Chicano/a literary production, some other 'categories' can be included, depending of whether one is guided by the revisionist or the innovative principle. The revisionist performances include female legendary figures, re-discovered by the Chicana as being the initial perpetrators of the 'castration complex': La Virgen de Guadalupe, la Malinche, La Llorona and the other Catholic or Indian/Aztec deities serve as objective instances of oppression. They are symbols that the 'spectators' can easily recognize and a re-enactment of their patriarchal nature under the light of the feminist atmosphere of the movement enables the latter to re-evaluate their validity as solid figures of ideology. Furthermore, the incorporation of general terms that have been traditionally inflicted with a subaltern position (such as daughter, wife, or even mother, the lover/mistress and the female worker) functions yet as another re-enactment. By assigning the female subjects the role they have stereotypically been confined to, the Chicana female writer is trying to display the possibility of change. And in most of the cases, change is a synonym of creation, initially in terms of language, and eventually of identity. The innovative principle functions on the same level of performance, but while tradition is assumed as drag in order to strip it off, the 'new' female identities are proudly performed, at times at extensive levels. They include the *soldadera* image that Herrera-Sobeck enlarged upon in her analysis, but also Gloria Anzaldúa's the *new mestiza* or Ana Castillo's *Xicanista*, overall the prototype of the empowered, self-confident woman, able to negotiate an in-between space from which to reconfigure the male/female dichotomy. In the same creative endeavor, the issue of lesbianism seems to function as the ultimate performance that challenges the validity and consistency of the male-normative discourse. Queer theory as reflected in the works of the Chicana, interrogates not only categories of sexual orientation, but also the social constructedness of the male/female relationships and their susceptibility to change. All these purport subsequent images of the feminine principle, in order to justify the fragmentariness of an identity in the making, which is never stable yet always somehow in opposition to the 'canonic' imaginary. What is noteworthy in the realm of feminist readings by Chicana is the fact that they rarely renounce the male antagonism completely. The Chicano writer, on the other hand, rarely focuses willingly on the female stereotypes, which is why the fractured identities of women are still present, even though not emphasized. When bringing out the female in a male-dominated narrative structure, the performance is still of difference, but leaves room for undisclosed developments. In a sense, writings like Luis Valdez, Jimmy Santiago Baca or Rolando Hinojosa's contribute to the female revisionism by reinforcing the positions that the Chicanas aim at deconstructing.

The female subject re-configuring within the Chicana feminist literary tradition poses the duality of exclusion/re-integration within a traditional framework. Both narratives and theoretical texts originating in the "marginal" space of the Chicano community have been systematically excluded from the traditional American literary history. Being a Chicana feminist writer is thus another way of responding to oppression, but by forcing the 'other' (in this case tradition) to accept interventions of a different community (namely the Mexican American one).

The female subjects of the borderlands, both in their social and theoretical construction, have assumed a new position in respect to their counterparts. Although initially concerned with revising stereotypes, a feature which is still to be observed on a subsequent level in recent writings by Chicanas, contemporary literary and artistic representations of the Chicana female subject no longer comply with that initial mode of expression – the revolt. Instead, Chicanas nowadays (as writers, academics, or as characters portrayed in the books) have already reached the state of political and self-awareness which enables them to claim a different role and renounce the set of “modifiers” traditionally associated with the gendered ‘other’.

A taxonomy of the female subject in the borderlands is bound to focus thus on both the ‘traditional’ imagery, re-performed by the Chicanas in order to be deconstructed, as well as on the neo-constructivist one. By formulating theories of difference, the Chicana female subject becomes a mediator between the canonic perceptions inflicted by Freudian psychoanalysis and the postmodern approaches to gender performativity. From being a ‘traitor’ through translation⁵, the female subject regains its creativity and is able to initiate another trajectory for its further existence in the no longer male-dominated world.

Although not exhaustively, the analysis of the female subject in the borderlands has revealed a set of images that could configure this taxonomy, in both literary and theoretical writings by Chicanos/as. The categories identified correspond to the three major preoccupations of the Chicana feminists. In revising tradition, they employ legendary figures such as La Virgen de Guadalupe/ Tonantzin, La Malinche, La Llorona in order to deconstruct their patriarchal upbringing as female ‘role-models’. Revisionism also entails a different approach to the ‘regularity’ of female subject positions as mothers, daughters or wives, by striving to charge them with a new set of meanings. By writing their own ‘myths’, Chicanas go beyond the patriarchal ‘ruling’ power and issue a new code with which to denominate the female experience. Eventually, the third category of femaleness in the borderlands encompasses the new identities, fragmented and re-constructed from the perspective of a self-conscious individual. The *soldadera*, *Xicanista* or the *new mestiza* stand for the evolutionary tendencies the postmodern subject implies, all the while incorporating race, ethnicity and sexuality in defining the female.

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Notes

[1] Such as Emma Perez in *The Decolonial Imaginary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999

[2] As developed in Freud, Sigmund *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 1962

[3] In *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds) New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982

[4] Tey Diana Rebolledo conceptualizes the “infinite divisions” between the traditional/canonic American literature and the Chicana in *Infinite Divisions. An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993

[5] Cf. Alarcon, Norma. “Traductora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism.” *Cultural Critique* 13 (Fall 1989), pp. 57-87.

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