

BLACK AND BROWN GODDESSES: FEMINIST ICONOGRAPHY  
IN CONTEMPORARY CHICANA AND  
AFRICAN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: RE-APPROPRIATING TRADITIONAL FEMALE ICONS IN MEXICAN AMERICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

The power of the mother has two aspects: the biological potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women.

-- Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's revolutionary anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* is an act of political activism, a compilation of essays written by women of color and Third World feminists advocating dialogue and unity among women. The necessity for women of color to have a dialogue forms the basis of the definition of Third World feminism. Chandra Mohanty defines Third World feminism as "imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but systemic" (46-7). Although these communities are comprised of different races, classes, and sexual orientations, they are unified by their struggles. The anthology, therefore,

stresses that in order to forge links, women of color must focus on issues that unite women cross-culturally, such as racism, colonialism, sexism, and capitalism. As a way to extend the bridge Anzaldúa and Moraga created with their publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, I focus on cross-cultural mothering and the need for feminist iconography in contemporary Chicana and African American literature. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow discusses how “the contemporary reproduction of mothering occurs through social structurally induced psychological processes” (7). She argues that a daughter’s mothering ability is contingent upon her mother: “Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself (7). According to Chodorow, the daughter’s self identity and mothering ability are contingent upon the mother; however, if the mother-daughter relationship is influenced by social structures, then male dominated social apparatuses have a profound effect on mothering.

Keeping Chodorow’s theoretical framework in mind, I analyze how male-dominated social structures of patriarchy and colonialism influence the mothering capabilities of women of color. I will first explore how racist and sexist ideology affect the mode and production of mothering for Mexican American and African American women in contemporary Chicana and African American literature and second, it will explain the need for a mother/goddess archetype to combat the oppressive forces of male patriarchy to empower and unify women of color. I will analyze Sandra Cisneros’s short stories “Never Marry a Mexican,” “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” and Toni Morrison’s

*Paradise* as well as draw upon the critical writing of Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde to supplement my analyses of the texts.

The historical meaning behind the existing female iconography in Mexican American and African American culture plays a significant role in society's perception and treatment of mothering. For Mexican American and African American women, their cultures' female icons or lack thereof, are entangled in racist and sexist ideology derivative of the conquest and slavery. In Mexican American culture, La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche (Doña Marina) are two integral figures in Mexico's history, culture, and folklore. Numerous men and women such as Octavio Paz, Norma Alarcón, and Sandra Cisneros have utilized La Virgen and La Malinche as tropes to examine Mexican American culture and have analyzed these icons as a way to either reinforce or deconstruct sexist stereotypes.

Legendary Mexican writer Octavio Paz writes an unsettling critique of Mexican culture in his 1950 essay "The Sons of La Malinche." In his essay, Paz examines the roles of males and females in Mexican culture through his analysis of La Virgen and La Malinche. Paz's essay has had a profound impact on the world's perception of Mexican and Mexican American culture because his engendered critique of La Virgen and La Malinche has given rise to widespread attitudes that evolved into cultural expectations that are deeply offensive and crippling to many Mexican American women.

In Paz's opinion, the conquest has created a conflicted and tormented past for Mexico's people. Despite the fact that many other countries and races have suffered from traumatic histories, he believes that the Mexican struggle is unique. While "servants,

slaves or races victimized by an outside power” such as African Americans “struggle against a concrete reality,” Mexicans and Mexican Americans struggle against lasting “imaginary entities, with vestiges of the past or self-engendered phantasms” (73). When Paz speaks of these “vestiges of the past or self-engendered phantasms,” he refers to not only the concrete, historical reality of the conquest, but also to its ideological implications. Mexican culture is unique in that it is a synthesis between the indigenous and the Spanish. Consequently, the remnants of colonization are internal, creating an inner conflict within Mexicans as they are forced to negotiate between two conflicting races and world-views. Although I do agree that every race and culture has its own distinct experience and history, I disagree with Paz and believe the commonalities among races that have struggled against slavery, colonialism, and imperialism outweigh the differences. While Paz chooses to isolate the Mexican experience, I draw out these cultural similarities to demonstrate the importance of shared meaning for the creation of cross-cultural solidarity.

Rather than relying upon historical facts, Paz’s version of the conquest is romantic and contrived because it relies upon the components of a fantasy—“seduction, rape, power, betrayal, and illegitimacy” (Sánchez 30). The protagonists of the story are the conquistador Cortés and his mistress Doña Marina, also known as La Malinche<sup>1</sup>. Throughout Paz’s essay, he utilizes Cortés and La Malinche’s relationship as the framework of his historical and sociological basis for the perceptions of Mexicans and

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<sup>1</sup>. There are three names attributed to La Malinche. The biological name that her parents bestowed upon her was Malintzin, while Doña Marina was the Christian name that the Spaniards gave to her. La Malinche was the name that the natives gave to her during the conquest (Alarcón *Traddutora* 61). I refer to Malintzin as La Malinche, because this title serves as her iconic name and I am analyzing her as icon.

Mexican Americans today, claiming that “the strange permanence of Cortés and La Malinche in the Mexican’s imagination and sensibilities reveals that they are something more than historical figures: they are symbols of a secret conflict that we have still not resolved” (87). Paz describes Cortés and La Malinche as the founders of the Mexican race; he believes their relationship symbolizes the hybridization of the Americas, the mixing of the indigenous Indians and the Spaniards. Therefore, these iconic figures are merely names and faces for the inter-mixing that has occurred between the races.

Since Paz bases the conquest upon the sexual relationship between Cortés and La Malinche, it is no surprise that his analysis of the Mexican race<sup>2</sup> primarily deals with gender roles and expectations attributed to Mexican males and females. Paz relies primarily upon La Malinche to categorize the societal norms between men and women. First, he defines La Malinche as the “*Chingada*” (86). The verb *chingar* has multiple meanings; however, it is most commonly used as an obscenity. In this context “the verb denotes violence, and emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force,” hence the name can translate to “the Fucked One” (76). Paz finds that “the person who suffers this action is passive, inert and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive and closed person who inflicts it. The *chingón* is the *macho*, the male; he rips open the *chingada*, the female, who is pure passivity, defenseless against the exterior world” (77). Paz decides that since “the *Chingada* is a representation of the violated mother, it is appropriate to associate her with the Conquest, which was also a violation, not only in the historical sense but also in the very flesh of Indian women. The symbol of this violation is doña Malinche” (86). Because La Malinche had a sexual relationship with Cortés, Paz asserts

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<sup>2</sup> Although the Mexican race does not exist, I use this term because this is how Paz refers to Mexican ethnicity and nationality in “The Sons of La Malinche.”

that she has been violated. By equating La Malinche's sexual relationship to a violation, he removes any type of agency she may have had and defines her according to her sexuality.

Moreover, Paz utilizes his definition of the *Chingada* to categorize not only the relationship between La Malinche and Cortés, but all relationships between men and women. Because of a woman's anatomical characteristics, Paz classifies females as not only the weaker sex, but also as prone to rape. He firmly believes, that "in effect, every woman—even when she gives herself willingly is torn open by the man, is the *Chingada*" (80). Paz uses both the definition of the verb and the negative connotation that surrounds it to vilify La Malinche. As he runs through the list of words associated with the verb *chingar*, he also utilizes its subsequent meanings such as defamation, humiliation, molestation, and violence (76). His decision to associate La Malinche with the negative meanings of the verb reiterates the contempt he feels for this figure.

The reasoning for Paz's disapproval for La Malinche emerges as he discusses her relationship with Cortés. He admits that Cortés did not technically rape La Malinche, and yet, this makes their relationship more appalling to him because "she gave herself voluntarily to the conquistador." However, Paz vindictively retorts that since "[Cortés] forgot her as soon as her usefulness was over," she should be considered victimized (86). However, rather than faulting Cortés for "raping" La Malinche, and claiming the indigenous people's land, he places the blame solely upon La Malinche and vilifies her. He feels as though La Malinche betrayed her people and her culture for a white man and thus she must be punished.

More so, Paz finds that “above all, she is the Mother” (75). In his identification of La Malinche as the mother, he effectively blames her for the outcome of the conquest. Because she aided in Cortés’s rise to power, he blames her for deserting her children, the hybrid Mexicans. However, in doing so, he infantilizes Mexicans and writes, “as a small boy will not forgive his mother if she abandons him to search for his father, the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal” (86). He employs the Eurocentric attitude of the Spanish conquistadors when he refers to his own people as infantile and corrupt. On one hand, he portrays Mexicans as small children who cannot stop crying for their true mother, while at the same instance they are macho men who have the power to commit “acts that produce confusion, horror and destruction” (81).

I find that Paz’s analysis of La Malinche is based upon contradictions. While he finds her responsible for the birth of a nation, and grants her the power to create a country full of orphaned men with masculine complexes, he perpetually undermines her by referring to her as weak and “passive” (85). Throughout his essay, Paz effectively fails to refer to any historical documents to support his interpretation of La Malinche.

While Paz’s argument lacks historical interpretation in “The Sons of the Malinche,” Sandra Messinger Cypess incorporates Aztec history and anthropological data in her essay “‘Mother’ Malinche and Allegories of Gender, Ethnicity and National Identity in Mexico.” Cypess describes La Malinche’s role as a translator as her defining feature, for “in history, first and foremost [she] was “la lengua” for Cortés” (17). As the translator for Cortés, she was a liaison between the Indians and the Spaniards at a time when, as in traditional European culture, “[Aztec] women had no right to speak on high public occasions” (Clendinnen 157). In fact, anthropologist Brenda Rosenbaum has found

that in the Aztec culture, there was the “existence of a profound ambivalence towards women” (Cypess 17). Thus, La Malinche “transcended all gender constraints of both Aztec and European societies when she functioned in the role of intermediary and translator [and] disrupted the general Amerindian ‘curb on women’s tongues in public places’ as well as the Christian restrictions against women as speakers in public” (17). In La Malinche’s role as a translator, she provided a service that utilized her intelligence rather than her sexuality. Despite her well-known role as Cortés’s translator, throughout “The Sons of La Malinche” Paz he fails to mention her livelihood and refers to her only as a “mistress” (86). Whether Paz was unaware of La Malinche’s role, or he refused to include it, this elision emphasizes how Paz failed to acknowledge the importance of her political role in Aztec society and the conquest.

In her essay, Cypess also mentions Paz’s adamancy in referring to La Malinche as a purely sexual being. She writes, “The historical record, as faulty as it is, nowhere indicates that she was sexually promiscuous, yet in subsequent myths and legends she became associated with conflictive motherhood and extreme sexual proclivity, as a whore in Paz’s synthesis of her image in [“The Sons of La Malinche”] (18). She continues, “My point in referring to her negative sexual reputation is not to restrain La Malinche with any naïve—or false—moral code that did not apply to her, but to suggest that those who condemn her as a whore do so on the basis of an erroneous sense of moral conduct that does not apply to her socio-historical context” (18). Furthermore, Paz contradicts himself when he condemns La Malinche for having a sexual relationship with Cortés. Even though he claims La Malinche was a victim of a sexual violation, he later faults her for it, writing “Doña Marina becomes a figure representing the Indian women who were

fascinated, violated or seduced by the Spaniards [...] the Mexican people have not forgiven La Malinche for her betrayal” (87). Paz’s basis for condemning La Malinche as a figure of treachery and betrayal rests solely on the idea that as a woman she is open and passive and that her “taint is constitutional and resides [...] in her sex” (85).

Furthermore, Paz’s assertion that La Malinche’s “sex” has led to betrayal transforms her into an Eve-like figure as she carries the “original sin,” the downfall of Mexico with the creation of *mestizaje*.

The other national icon whom Paz references in his essay is La Virgen de Guadalupe. According to legend, La Virgen de Guadalupe appeared to the Indian Juan Diego on the hill of Tepayac in 1531 (Northrop 25). The site of her apparition was the site of an Aztec temple where Aztecs honored Tonantzin, the goddess of the Earth and corn (27). La Virgen’s appearance came at a pivotal moment in history because she appeared only a decade after the conquest occurred in 1519 (Rodriguez 2). Physically, La Virgen was reminiscent of the Aztec Indians as “she was not the pale Spanish Virgin [...], but a morena or dark-skinned one, whom, because of her color, the Indians would more readily trust and love” (qtd. in Northrop 27). Furthermore, because La Virgen appeared at Tonantzin’s temple, the indigenous Indians were able to transfer their goddess worship to her (Lockhart 243). Thus, La Virgen becomes a syncretic image, as she literally and figuratively embodies the mixing of the Ancient Aztec world with Western European culture.

Unfortunately, Paz’s portrayal of La Virgen de Guadalupe is not much more forgiving than his opinion of La Malinche. He describes La Virgen as “a passive figure” who “consoles, quiets, dries tears, [and] calms passions” (85). While he discusses the

popular myth of La Virgen, he makes a decisive choice to separate La Virgen from the ancient Aztec goddesses she was once linked to:

The Indian goddesses were goddesses of fecundity, linked to the cosmic rhythms, the vegetative processes and agrarian rites. The Catholic Virgin is also the Mother, [...] but her principal attribute is not to watch over the fertility of the earth but to provide refuge for the unfortunate. The situation has changed: the worshipers do not try to make sure of their harvests but to find a mother's lap. The Virgin is the consolation of the poor, the shield of the weak, the help of the oppressed. (85)

Paz is careful to make a clear distinction between the omnipotent Aztec goddesses and La Virgen to ensure that she appears passive and weak. While Paz describes the Aztec goddesses as powerful agents who have the ability to control the earth, he distances La Virgen from her predecessors by describing her as a figure who protects people. Rather than controlling the earth's fertility and cosmic rhythms, La Virgen merely "consoles, quiets, dries tears, calms passions" (85). These Aztec goddesses were anything but passive, but if Paz were to delineate these characteristics to La Malinche and La Virgen the female icons would exemplify the characteristics of the *chingón* rather than the *chingada*. Paz's perception of La Virgen and La Malinche resides on the premise that they are open, passive, and receptive, and equating them to the Aztec goddesses would grant them too much power and refute his engendered stereotypes.

Therefore, Paz not only removes agency from La Virgen by distancing her from these Aztec goddesses, he looks down upon those who worship her. His diction and tone

are slightly condescending when he writes, “the worshipers do not try to make sure of their harvest but try to find a mother’s lap” (85). While he employs agency to the Aztecs who worked to have bountiful harvests, he demeans those that follow La Virgen by characterizing them as children who seek for a mother’s care rather than ensuring a successful harvest. He once again employs the attitude of the colonizer to infantilize his own people.

Paz not only decides to distance Guadalupe from her ancient Aztec properties, he does not place her or La Malinche in the same category as other world goddesses. He writes, “Neither in [La Malinche] nor in the Virgin do we find traces of the darker attributes of the great goddesses: the lasciviousness of Amaterasu and Aphrodite, the cruelty of Artemis and Astrarte, the sinister magic of Circe or the blood lust of Kali” (85). Paz’s decision to distance them from the other renowned goddesses of the world further illustrates his deprecating view of his culture’s icons. Isolating Mexico’s female icons from well-known figures of the world further degrades their goddess status and discredits their power by denying them the ability to perform powerful and cruel acts of destruction and greatness. The discrepancies in Paz’s portrayal of the icons illustrate his own difficulties in negotiating his culture’s icons and prescribed gender roles. Unfortunately, the only way that Paz seems to reconcile the conflicting images is by adopting the Eurocentric view of the colonizer as he manipulates these icons into figures that lack agency and hold limited power.

The fear or distrust towards women that Paz expresses is a reoccurring theme present in the texts I will analyze in the following chapters. Paz’s attitude towards women is consistent with Chodorow’s and hooks’ theories on masculinity in their books

*Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* and *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*.

First, in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* Chodorow argues, “women’s mothering generated, more or less universally, a defensive masculine identity in men and compensatory psychology and ideology of masculine superiority. This psychology and ideology sustained male dominance” (1).

In fact, I find that what Chodorow calls “a defensive masculine identity” is what Paz refers to as “the *macho*.” Paz directly links the Mexican male’s hyper-masculinity to the flaws of a woman’s mothering. He believes men are “deprived of Maternal protection” due to La Malinche’s betrayal, and therefore men must overcompensate by engaging in the “violent, sarcastic humiliation of the Mother (80). This necessity to humiliate and overpower the Mother has evolved into the societal norm of machismo, in which “males develop an overly masculine and aggressive response to their women” (Rodriguez 71). Paz asserts that the “essential attribute of [the] *macho* [is] power” which “almost always reveals itself as a capacity for wounding, humiliating, annihilating” (81, 82). Paz’s perception of the macho is deeply disturbing. He describes a man’s exhibition of violence as “just” and necessary to “re-establish the equilibrium” between men and women:

The *macho* commits *chingaderas*, that is, unforeseen acts that produce confusion, horror, and destruction. The opens the world; in doing so, he rips and tears it, and this violence provokes a great sinister laugh. And in its own way, it is just; it re-establishes the equilibrium and puts things in their places, by reducing them to dust, to misery, to nothingness. (81)

In Paz's analysis of "the *macho*," he finds that because men have been repudiated by La Malinche, they are especially prone to display these attitudes. Because Paz views La Malinche as "nothingness," he believes it is the man's prerogative to take his aggression out on the world and turn others, such as women, into "nothingness." As Paz comments on this behavior he asserts that through acting "*macho*" men can attempt to reject the image of the Mother and gain power.

Like La Malinche, La Virgen is infused with the doctrines of male patriarchy, and consequently is traditionally a figure that perpetuates the disempowerment of women. For example, the idolization of La Virgen has developed into the cultural expectation of *Marianismo* among Mexican women. *Marianismo* enforces values of chastity and purity for young girls, and self-sacrifice and humility in motherhood, "urging women to submit, obey [and] accept" (Randall 114). *Marianismo* pressures women to emulate the characteristics of the Virgin within their families: "The vast majority of Mexican and Latin American women [. . .] have been expected to repress their own growth needs as they attended to the needs of men," thereby sacrificing themselves in order to portray the compassionate and motherly qualities of La Virgen (Randall 119). As a famous religious and cultural icon, she is also a social icon who delineates specific gender roles for Mexican American women.

However, since the 1970's and the rise of Chicana Feminism, Chicanas have begun to explore these cultural symbols of motherhood and have contested the sexist ideology attributed to Mexico's iconography through art and literature. Writers such as Norma Alarcón and Sandra Cisneros have responded to this ideology in their writing by

describing the negative consequences that these cultural icons have had and continue to have on Mexican American women.

Norma Alarcón's "Chicana Feminist Literature: A Revision through Malintzin/or Malintizin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object" directly attacks Paz's gendered narrative by illustrating how it perpetuates the male gaze and cripples the advancement of Mexican American women. Alarcón describes the negative consequences that Paz's male myth has on Mexican American women by analyzing resulting conflicts it generates in mother-daughter relationships. Alarcón describes how sexualized figures like La Malinche have led to a male myth that views women as "sexually passive, and hence at all times open to potential use by men whether it is seduction or rape" (184).

Alarcón finds that "within the complex mother-daughter relationship, the mother keeps bearing responsibility for the daughter's emotional starvation, abandonment or enslavement, yet paradoxically both are subordinate and subjected to male culture and tradition" (185). Because both the mother and daughter live within the limitations of a patriarchal society and are sexually vulnerable, the mother is unable to protect her daughter from the male's sexual gaze. The mother's helplessness leads to the breakdown of her relationship with her daughter and ultimately breeds hatred among women (183). Alarcón's analysis of the cyclicity of female hatred perfectly coheres to Chodorow's notion that a daughter's self-worth and mothering capabilities are contingent upon her relationship with her mother. When there is a breakdown in a mother-daughter relationship, it will affect the daughter when she becomes a mother, and therefore hinder the subsequent generations. If a mother cannot teach her daughter to love herself despite the constraints of patriarchy, the mother will reproduce female-hatred and ineffective

mothers. Thus, the only way to truly break this cycle is by confronting the source and altering the Mother icon.

As Alarcón tackles the negative societal repercussions associated with La Malinche, Sandra Cisneros responds to the traditional view of La Virgen in her personal essay “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess.” In her essay, Cisneros grapples with the unrealistic expectations of La Virgen and describes the pain and confusion she felt growing up due to the way her religion and culture thrust the traditional values of *Marianismo* upon her.

Cisneros recalls the guilt and shame she experienced as she matured into a young woman and began to explore her sexuality. She comments how “in the guise of modesty [her] culture lock[s] [women] in a double chastity belt of ignorance and *veregüenza*, shame” (46). The strict social limitations of *Marianismo* leave a young Cisneros ashamed and ignorant of her body, and sexual desires. Her body and sexuality are a mystery, and with no womanly figure to turn to, she is left hiding her body in the girls’ locker room while the “white women strutted around the locker room, nude as pearls [. . .] unashamed of their brilliant bodies” (46). Without the societal constrictions of Mexican culture and *Marianismo*, the young white girls are free to proudly show their womanly bodies, a sense of pride that is foreign to Cisneros. These feelings of guilt and shame explain “why [Cisneros] was angry for so many years every time [she] saw La Virgen de Guadalupe, [her] culture’s role model for brown women [...] She was damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable” (48). She recognizes that La Virgen is an unattainable role model whose level of perfection destines women to fail.

Although La Virgen and La Malinche are problematic icons, their existence gives Chicanas the opportunity to identify with a culturally relevant mother figure. However, in African American culture, there remain few prominent black mother figures for African American women to identify and claim as their own. As in Mexican American culture, the lack of positive feminine iconography stems from a troublesome history. Historic events such as “migration, assimilation, and slavery seriously impaired black women’s ability to perform their maternal function as cultural bearer and hence weakened the motherline” which may very well account for the culture’s lack of female representation (O’Reilly 73). Because there are a decreased number of feminist icons, it is imperative to create mother/goddesses that African American women can find uplifting, identifiable, and culturally relevant. Therefore, the rigid cultural infrastructures of family, religion, and gender that Alarcón and Cisneros respond to in their writings are not exclusive to Mexican American women and parallel the hardships of African American women.

Paz’s obsession with female sexuality and masculinity is a cultural concern that not only pertains to Mexicans and Mexican Americans; it is very similar to the cultural matters that hooks accounts for in *We Real Cool*. Just as Paz bases hyper-masculinity upon the conquest, hooks finds that the adoption of hyper-masculinity dates back to an extreme historical event, slavery. In both cultures, men have responded to white patriarchy by attempting to model white masculinity. Paz describes the *macho* characteristics that Mexican men exhibit as a testament to the Spaniard conquistadors, as “it is impossible not to notice the resemblance between the figure of the *macho* and that of Spanish conquistador. That is the model—more mythical than real—that determines the images the Mexican people form of men in power...” (82). As the Mexicans adopted

the model of white patriarchy from the Spanish conquistadors, hooks finds that African Americans adopted white patriarchy from slave owners:

Enslaved black males were socialized by white folks to believe that they should endeavor to become patriarchs by seeking to attain the freedom to provide and protect for black women, to be benevolent patriarchs.

Benevolent patriarchs exercise their power without using force. And it was this notion of patriarchy that educated black men coming from slavery into freedom sought to mimic. However, a large majority of black men took as their standard the dominator model set by white masters. When slavery ended these black men often used violence to dominate black women, which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slave-masters used. Some newly freed black men would take their wives to the barn to beat them as the white owner had done. Clearly, by the time slavery ended patriarchal masculinity had become an accepted ideal for most black men, an ideal that would be reinforced by twentieth-century norms. (4)

[H]ooks' research indicates that African American women encounter crippling patriarchal structures from not only outside their culture, but within it as well. Therefore, the sexist gender roles that exist between Mexican American men and women are also found within African American culture.

[B]ell hooks' *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* describes the female black experience, voicing the needs and concerns of African American women. Many of the issues hooks discusses mirror those that Mexican American women struggle

with daily, such as beauty, self-worth, motherhood, and martyrdom. [H]ooks discusses how society's obsession with Western standards of beauty has led to the deprecation of femininity. A woman's curves, natural hair texture, and dark skin have been pitted against the thin, straight-haired, and white female bodies associated with European women that are in vogue, causing many black women to internalize racist/sexist notions of beauty (84). Living in a society in which white beauty is glorified inflicts pain and low self-esteem upon African American women, as they are unable to achieve this unattainable and unrealistic ideal.

[H]ooks argues that the mother plays a crucial role in a child's perception of beauty: "[F]or if the majority of black children are being raised by black females then certainly how we perceive ourselves, our blackness, informs the social construction of our individual and collective identity" (*Yam* 84). Although hooks stresses that the role of the mother is to provide her child with positive representations of blackness, this is often problematic, for often the mother is too ingrained with racist/sexist notions of beauty to offer her child much support: "Within white-supremacist patriarchal society, it is very difficult to find affirming images of black femaleness"(83). Hence, it is difficult for a mother to offer her daughter an uplifting portrait of black beauty (83). [H]ooks claims that because there are few affirming images of black womanness there remains negative stereotyping of black women. Rather than empowering images serving as popular figures, these negative stereotypes have become the widespread model of black femaleness. Without a positive role model to guide the mother and child to self-love, it is extremely difficult for women to fully love and appreciate their black bodies. Therefore, we must replace society's negative stereotype of African American women with a positive figure

of black femininity. Since the fostering of self-love and pride is contingent upon the mother, a black Mother figure is essential for the self-recovery of African American women and children.

In order to integrate an empowering black Mother into African American culture, it would be beneficial to appropriate a figure resembling La Virgen because there remain very few well-known mother figures in African American culture. Yet, while researching La Virgen, I discovered the prevalence of the black virgins, Guadalupe of Extramadura and Our Lady of Montserrat. However, unlike La Virgen, there remains very little scholarship on the black Madonna, even though her statues, paintings, and images have been found throughout Europe since as early as 40 AD (Boyer 34). Despite the fact that “there are more than five hundred [black Virgins] in Europe alone,” the Catholic Church has failed to claim and integrate these figures into mainstream society (34). The Church instead claims that the Madonna’s black skin is due to candle smoke, gunpowder, or the age of the statue’s wood (34). The Church’s inability to accept a black Madonna illustrates its historical denial of minority representations of Christian figures.

Audre Lorde expresses the personal pain she experiences due to the Church’s denial of black female goddesses. In “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” Lorde attacks white feminist Mary Daly and her book *Gyn/Ecology*. In Daly’s book on goddesses, she fails to include representations of black goddesses. In doing so, she follows the trend of the Catholic Church by denying the existence of black figures such as Our Lady of Montserrat. Despite the numerous paintings and shrines devoted to the black Virgin, the Catholic Church has maintained its allegiance to the white Madonna. Audre Lorde expresses her dissatisfaction with these white representations of the Madonna, by

questioning “why are [...] goddess-images only, white, western-european, judeo-christian?” (94). To Lorde, this figure is representative of whiteness, patriarchy, and colonization, and the Virgin thus remains an ineffective and detrimental icon for women of color. Moreover, the Church’s silence on the black Madonna effectively erases her ties to ancient African and Mesopotamian goddesses (Boyer 42).

Lorde comments on the detrimental effect this elision has on black women: “I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power” (95-96). Lorde’s powerful statement reiterates the importance of an identifiable female icon, for this exclusion creates a deep personal loss. She elaborates on this loss to include the effects it has upon women of all races by writing, “What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* [as well as Christianity] dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women, and denied the real connections between us” (95). Lorde stresses that the inclusion and recognition of black goddesses in Western religion is vital not just for the African community, but also for the unification of the entire female community. However, the Catholic Church’s refusal to honor the Madonna’s black skin keeps this figure from reaching the African American community and dangerously denies all women of color an identifiable icon.

In order for black Virgins such as Our Lady of Montserrat to become integrated within the African American community, she must once again transcend the rigidity of Catholicism and undergo a physical and cultural reconfiguration. The reclaiming of this Mother figure by the African American community would not only disrupt the hegemony of Judeo-Christianity, but it would also negate the negative stereotype of African American women that hooks describes in *Sisters of Yam*. In *homegrown: engaged*

*cultural criticism*, hooks expresses the importance this figure would have for the black community. After viewing the black virgin, Our lady of Montserrat, hooks “remember[s] that sense of awe, particularly as a Black-skinned woman thinking of what takes place in the reimagining of the Black female not as a whore, bitch, or bearer of violence, but as a bearer of the sacred, the healing, and the inspiring” (27). Our Lady of Montserrat could become a symbol that actively attacks Western notions of beauty by celebrating blackness as holy and beautiful. While hooks claims “African Americans have not been interested in reclaiming” the black Madonna, the conflicts she expresses in *Sisters of the Yam* illustrate that there is a dire need for the African American community to do so (28). Toni Morrison directly responds to hooks’ assertion by re-introducing the black Madonna in her novel *Paradise*. Morrison reacts to the lack of black female iconography by re-appropriating the black Virgin through her characterization of Consolata and her spiritual mother Piedade.

Coupling Norma Alarcon’s and bell hooks’ cultural analysis with Chodorow’s psychoanalysis of mothering facilitates the analysis of the psychological, social, and cultural factors that affect the mother-daughter relationships among women of color. I will apply these theorists and their texts to Sandra Cisneros’s short stories “Never Marry a Mexican,” “Little Miracles, Broken Promises,” and Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* to illustrate the centrality of the mother to the daughter’s social development, and reiterate the dangers of racism, sexism, and colonialism. Through this thesis, I propose that the way to alter the perception and treatment of women of color is to remove the male gaze’s negative interpretation of traditional female iconography to create identifiable feminist icons.

## CHAPTER II

### INEFFECTIVE MOTHERING IN “NEVER MARRY A MEXICAN” AND *PARADISE*

Todavía soy la hija de mi mamá. Keep thinking, *it's the daughters*. It's the daughters who remain loyal to their mother, although this loyalty is not always reciprocated. To be free means on some level to release that painful devotion when it began to punish us. Stop the chain of events. La procesión de mujeres sufriendo. Dolores my grandmother, Dolores her daughter, Dolores her daughter's daughter. Free the daughter to love her own daughter. It is the daughters who are my audience.

--Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*

In this chapter, I examine the way male patriarchy affects the familial structure, and in particular the mother/daughter relationships in “Never Marry a Mexican” and *Paradise*. Throughout the texts, the female characters in the literary works find themselves suffering in their roles as mothers and daughters. Analyzing the interactions between mothers and daughters reveals how male patriarchy infiltrates the mother-daughter relationships and breeds abandonment, confusion, and condemnation of female sexuality.

Cisneros's short story “Never Marry a Mexican” is a captivating tale of a wronged mistress seeking vindication. Her interesting play on familial relationships and

sex roles blurs the black and white lines of morality while questioning cultural expectations. While some critics have attacked Cisneros for creating her protagonist Clemencia as a clichéd mistress, I read her as a daughter who has simply lost her mother. She is jilted, yes, but not by her lover, but by the deeper, irrevocable pain of the physical and emotional death of a mother. Applying both Chodorow's psychoanalysis of mothering and Norma Alarcón's essay "A Revision Through Malintzin/or Malintzin" reveals that Clemencia's true source of pain derives from the lack of effective mothering she received throughout her child and adult life.

Cisneros opens the short story with the voice of Clemencia's mother: "Never Marry a Mexican, my ma said once and always" (68). It is symbolic that Cisneros opens with the spoken words of Clemencia's mother because Clemencia's story literally, figuratively, and biologically begins with her mother. This opening line illustrates that Clemencia's mother is a pivotal person in Clemencia's life and thus central to Cisneros's story. In the next sentence, Clemencia continues, "She said this because of my father" (68). The next line is equally as telling as it reveals that the father, a symbol of patriarchy, dictates the mother's thoughts and words. This sentence further exemplifies that while the mother impacts the daughter, the father in turn manipulates the mother. These two simple sentences demonstrate how patriarchy directly infiltrates the mother-daughter relationship.

Very early on in the story, Cisneros divulges that Clemencia has a deeply troubling relationship with her mother. Although the readers never actually meet Clemencia's mother, we learn about her from the broken memories Cisneros deliberately sprinkles throughout the story. The little we glean from these memories shows that

Clemencia's mother struggled greatly as a wife and mother. As Clemencia looks back upon her parents' marriage, she recalls the vast cultural and class differences between them. Clemencia's mother grew up in a poor Mexican American family, while her husband was from Mexico City, son of a middle class family "that was neither poor nor rich, but thought itself better than both" (70). These class and cultural differences caused her husband's family to look down upon her:

[She] had to put up with all the grief a Mexican family can put on a girl because she 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 that white girl was poor. But what could be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl who couldn't even speak Spanish, who didn't know enough to set a separate plate for each course at dinner, nor how to fold cloth napkins, nor how to set the silverware. (69)

Despite their shared race, these cultural and class distinctions play a large part in the division between Clemencia's mother and father. Even though Clemencia's mother herself was Mexican, "She was born here in the U.S and he was born there and it's *not* the same" (68). Although readers know very little of Clemencia's father, we do know that he grew up in a very traditional and privileged household, where he was expected to be served and waited upon. Furthermore, he was also an extremely proud man, who had expensive tastes and preferred "clothes that cost a lot" (71). According to Clemencia's mother he was a show-off, "a *fanfarrón*. That's what my mother thought the moment she turned around to the voice that was asking her to dance. A big show-off, she'd say years later. Nothing but a big show-off" (71). The cultivated "world her father left behind" was

a far cry from the easy informality of Clemencia's mother's family, where her father, a "big hardworking Mexican man" would invite anyone and everyone for dinner (70). In this family, the mother was not expected to serve her family, rather she lived in a house with shared responsibility and communal living, as "the plates were always stacked in the center of the table, the knives and forks and spoons standing in a jar, [to] help yourself" (70).

The differences between Clemencia's mother and father rely greatly upon these gendered norms. Paz's description of the "*macho*" applies to Clemencia's father. According to his familial background and "*macho*" characteristics, Clemencia's father most likely reinforced traditional gender roles in the home. Consequently, because Clemencia's father upheld the traits of *machismo*, Clemencia's mother most likely suffered from the expectations of *Marianismo*, in which she was supposed to obediently perform her wifely and motherly duties. Since Clemencia's mother did not grow up experiencing the rigid gender norms and expectations of the traditional Mexican wife, she feels lost, confused, and oppressed in her marriage.

Since Clemencia's mother did not grow up experiencing the rigid gender norms and expectations of the traditional Mexican wife, she feels trapped and isolated, which affects how she views herself and raises her children. Chodorow explains in *The Reproduction of Mothering* that "mothering is most eminently a psychologically based role. It consists in psychological and personal experience of self in relationship to child and children" (32). Because "mothering is most eminently a psychologically based role," it is no surprise that Clemencia's mother's feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth subsequently affect her daughter. She often complains to her children that she is not

happy: “‘Because I married so young, *mi’ja*,’ she’d say. ‘Because your father, he was so much older than me, and I never had a chance to be young.’” (73).

Her mother’s inability to negotiate between her own personal concerns and the well being of her daughters causes Clemencia to internalize her mother’s feelings of inadequacy. Clemencia painfully recalls, “Ma always sick and too busy worrying about her own life, she would’ve sold us to the devil if she could” (73). As an adult, Clemencia continues to harbor feelings of resentment for her mother’s selfishness. Her mother’s preoccupation with her own life results in Clemencia’s own obsession with herself and her own selfish needs.

Even more disturbing, the mother’s desire for her daughters to live beyond cultural limitations results in an anti-Mexican sentiment that is deeply troubling to Clemencia’s perception of herself and her culture. Clemencia’s mother utilizes her own personal feelings of inadequacy to teach her daughter to avoid Mexican men. Growing up with these racist notions formulates her future actions towards men, women, and herself. According to Chodorow, childhood experience and teachings have a profound influence upon an adult’s life:

Psychoanalysis shows how the unconscious inner world, or worlds, developed during childhood affect the external experiences of adulthood [...] These inner worlds and intrapsychic conflicts are imposed upon and give meaning to external situations. They affect the kinds of situations in which people put themselves, and their behavior and feelings within them. Adults unconsciously look to recreate, and are often unable to avoid

recreating, aspects of their early relationships, especially to the extent that these relationships were unresolved, ambivalent and repressed. All people are partly preoccupied with internal experiences and mental life, partly live their past in the present. This preoccupation, moreover, can either enrich interpersonal relations (and work), or can distort and even destroy them. (*Reproduction* 51)

Clemencia's relationships with men and women are "distort[ed] and destroy[ed]" because she is unable to move beyond the pain that her mother's abandonment causes her.

Furthermore, because Clemencia's mother teaches her as a child that racial differences pose conflict, she learns to discriminate against her own race and culture and as an adult grapples with this issue. After listening to her mother's implicit instructions, Clemencia internalizes her mother's racist notions and avoids all Mexican men:

Mexican men, forget it. For a long time the men clearing off the tables or chopping meat behind the butcher counter or driving the bus I rode to school every day, those weren't men. Not men I considered potential lovers. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chilean, Columbian, Panamanian, Salvadorian, Bolivian, Honduran, Argentine, Dominican, Venezuelan, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Costa Rican, Paraguayan, Uruguayan, I don't care. I never saw them. My mother did this to me. (69)

Clemencia's "preoccupation" with race winds up "distort[ing]" and "destroy[ing]" future relationships she forms with men. Hence, she follows her mother advice by engaging in a relationship with an older white male. Clemencia's adherence to her mother's teachings

follows Chodorow's notion that "it is the mother's and not the father's voice that gives the principal early approval and disapproval, the nagging voice of conscience is feminine in both sexes" (*Feminism* 34). However, this tends to be problematic because Chodorow also finds that "as children of either sex attempt to gain independence—to make decisions on their own that are different from their upbringing--they must do this by consciously or unconsciously rejecting their mother (and people like her) and the things she associated with" (*Feminism* 34). Clemencia eventually discovers that patriarchy is systemic and cross-cultural and even though she decides to engage in affairs outside of her cultural sphere, she continues to experience and suffer from it. While she may follow her mother's "nagging voice of conscience," her mother's lasting advice to "never marry a Mexican" cannot erase the existence of male patriarchy. Until Clemencia ignores the incessant voice of her mother within her head, these racist/sexist notions will continue to dictate her life. Therefore, the only way for Clemencia to move beyond this cultural stereotype is by "rejecting" her biological mother and forging an alternate mother/figure.

Besides instructing Clemencia to stereotype her own culture, Clemencia's mother models how to utilize the role of the mistress to gain socio-economic benefits. Clemencia's mother attempts to escape from the cultural limitations by engaging in an extramarital affair. Although this action may appear threatening to the patriarchal norm by transgressing the sacred rite of marriage, in actuality she moves from the clutches of one controlling husband into the arms of another. This time even though Clemencia's mother refuses to "marry a Mexican," she finds herself in relationship equally as restrictive, if not *moreso*, than her previous marriage. While by racial and economic standards Clemencia's mother does improve her standing by marrying the Anglo factory

foreman Owen Lambert, she is now simply under the control of another man. She allows Lambert to use his race and economic standing to manipulate her into relinquishing her children and family's home.

For Clemencia, her mother's second marriage adds yet another layer of pain to her relationship with her mother, for "when she married that white man, and he and his boys moved into my father's house, [it was] as if she stopped being my mother" (73). After marrying Lambert, Clemencia's mother's power becomes so limited that her daughters are unable to return to their childhood home. Thus, Clemencia is left motherless and homeless—"My half brothers living in that house that should've been ours, me and Ximena's. But that's—how do you say?—water under the damn?"(73). Clemencia's mother's decision to leave her family's home under the possession of Lambert's white sons is yet another example where she sacrifices her daughters for fear of disrupting the dominant patriarchal structure.

In addition to Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory, a cultural perspective further illuminates the racist/sexist notions that are at work beneath the mother-daughter relationship. Clemencia's relationship with her mother profoundly affects how she treats and perceives herself and others, specifically affecting her view on men and sex. As Alarcón discusses in "Malintzin," "the mother is impotent to help the daughter. All of her energies seem directed, spent in her desire and need for a man, a factor that repulses and attracts the daughter" (183). As Alarcón suggests, Clemencia is completely "repulsed and attracted" by her mother's preoccupation with herself and men. She attempts to adhere to her mother's advice by swearing, "I'll never marry. Not any man" (68). Yet, she openly admits, "there was a time when all I wanted was to belong to a man. To wear that gold

band on my left hand and be worn on his arm like an expensive jewel brilliant in the light of day” (68). Clemencia witnesses her mother’s flitting from husband to husband, from marriage and marriage, and a part of Clemencia desperately wants to be like her mother and be “worn on [a man’s] arm.”

Furthermore, like her mother, Clemencia enjoys sabotaging the normative family structure by playing the role of the mistress. Clemencia recalls that her mother “was seeing [Lambert] while [her] father was sick” (73). She vividly remembers that her mother continued to see him “when my father was coughing up blood and phlegm in the hospital, half his face frozen, and his tongue so fat he couldn’t talk...”(74). Her mother continued seeing this man even while “the doctor [was] scraping the phlegm out of [her] father’s mouth with a white cloth” and “death was already sitting on his chest” (74). Although Clemencia cannot forgive her mother for cheating on her father while he was sick in the hospital, her own actions parallel her mother.

While Clemencia claims she hates her mother for cheating on her father, she mimics her behavior by engaging in infidelity. She does not feel shame for sleeping with married men; in fact, she prefers it: “Borrowed. That’s how I have had my men. Just the cream skimmed off the top. Just the sweetest part of the fruit, without the bitter skin that daily living with a spouse can rend. They’ve come to me when they wanted the sweet meat then” (69). Disturbingly, Clemencia not only prefers sleeping with married men, she relishes sleeping with them while their wives are in the hospital giving birth:

Why do I do that I wonder? Sleep with a man when his wife is giving life,  
being suckled by a thing with its eyes still shut. Why do I do that? It’s

always given me a bit of crazy joy to be able to kill those women like that without them knowing it. To know I've had their husbands when they were anchored in blue hospital rooms, their guts yanked inside out, the baby sucking their breasts while their husbands sucked mine. All of this while their ass stitches were still hurting. (77)

Cisneros's graphic depiction of these hospital scenes is crude and shocking. Using graphic terminology such as "guts yanked out" and "ass stitches [...] hurting" to describe giving birth illustrates her irreverence towards mothering. Because of her own conflicted relationship with her mother, she lacks a sensitivity and understanding of childbirth and motherhood. Similarly, the diction Cisneros employs to describe Clemencia's father's sickness is also slightly grotesque, which exemplifies the perverseness of the mother and daughter's actions. Although both hospital scenes are described graphically, the shocking vulgarity of Clemencia's description of childbirth stresses that her actions are a much cruder version of the betrayal that her mother committed.

While Clemencia performs the same actions as her mother, her flippant attitude appears much more vindictive and cruel. Clemencia's mother at least attempts to rationalize her actions, by pleading to her daughter, "Because I married so young, *mi'ja* [...] Because your father, he was so much older than me, and I never had a chance to be young. Honey, try to understand..." (73). In contrast, Clemencia merely pauses for a second and questions, "Why do I do that, I wonder? [...] Why do that?" (76). Clemencia becomes the mirror image of her mother: one is sleeping with another man while her husband is dying, while the other is sleeping with a man while his wife is giving birth. For the mother, death follows sex, and for the daughter, sex begets life. Their shared

views on sex illustrate how the mother and daughter utilize their sexuality as a way to grapple with life and death.

The question both Clemencia and the text raise is, why would a woman who harbors such intense contempt for her mother commit the same atrocious actions? In order to respond to Clemencia's questioning, we can draw upon Chodorow and Alarcón's analysis. According to both theorists, Clemencia's actions reveal her mother's ineffective mothering. As Chodorow explains, "all people are partly preoccupied with internal experiences and mental life, partly live their past in the present. This preoccupation [...] can either enrich interpersonal relations [...] or can distort and even destroy them" (*Reproduction* 51). Although it is unclear when Clemencia's father died and Clemencia's mother's affair began, it is evident that these past events are a reoccurring source of pain for Clemencia. Perhaps a way for her to come to terms with her "preoccupation" with her mother's infidelity is for her to engage in her own affairs. Mimicking the actions of her mother subconsciously allows Clemencia to at some level reconcile the complexities of her relationship with her mother.

However, analyzing the situation through Alarcón's cultural critique illustrates that the mother and daughter are so embedded within the patriarchal system that the only way for them to attempt to subvert the order is by utilizing the tool of their oppressors, sexuality. Alarcón asserts that, "Because the myth of Malintzin pervades not only male thought but ours too as it seeps into our own consciousness in the cradle through their eyes as well as our mothers', who are entrusted with the transmission of culture, we may come to believe that indeed our very sexuality condemns us to enslavement. An enslavement which is subsequently manifested in self-hatred" (182). Because both

mother and daughter reside “within the patriarchal system,” the mother unknowingly passes on the male perception of sexuality to her daughter. While Clemencia’s mother may have thought cheating on her husband with another man was subversive, in reality she was merely adhering to Paz’s myth of Malintzin and female sexuality. While both women feel that their sexuality and affairs are freeing them from the constraints of the dominant patriarchal order, in actuality they are perpetuating the cycle. Furthermore, Clemencia’s mother loses all that she possesses due to her affair, while Clemencia fails to find a fulfilling relationship despite her true belief in marriage. Rather than marrying a man who “hasn’t disappointed [her], she condemns herself to a life of secrecy and solitude, “sneaking around [...] in different bars that all looked the same [...] dark bars, dark restaurants [...] and the bed so big because he never stayed the whole night” (68-9). Under the guise of subverting patriarchy, mother and daughter resort to sexual relationships that are unfulfilling and empty, and despite their desire to break free from the patriarchy, these relationships condemn them to “enslavement.”

Chodorow and Alarcón's analysis illustrates that the mother supplies the daughter with mothering capabilities, yet because Clemencia’s mother lacked maternal guidance she is left with the only skill that she truly learned from her mother, her sexuality. Therefore, Clemencia’s understanding of mothering and motherhood is interlaced with sexuality. Thus, her way of having and caring for a child translates into having a sexual relationship with one.

Because Clemencia equates her mother with sexual transgression, the only way that she knows how to mother is through acting out sexually. Thus, when Clemencia engages in a sexual relationship with a teenage boy she is illustrating the concept of

mothering that was taught to her. Clemencia chooses the boy to “mother” carefully, and initiates a sexual relationship with her ex-lover Drew’s son. Although Clemencia may not have biologically produced a child, she considers herself responsible for the procreation of her lover’s son—“your son. Does he know how much I had to do with his birth? I was the one who convinced you to let him be born. Did you tell him, while his mother lay on her back...” (75). She claims that she is “the one what gave [her lover] permission and made it happen” (75). Therefore, she in turn becomes a mother-like figure. As a mother instructs a child, she teaches him how to touch, kiss, and make love. She croons to him, “You’re almost not a man without your clothes. How do I explain it? You’re so much a child in my bed, nothing but a big boy who needs to be held. I won’t let anyone hurt you. My pirate. My slender boy of a man” (78). She croons to him as a mother would a baby, caring for him with warm caresses, milk, and kisses. With no motherly alternative to counteract the negative influence of her mother, Clemencia twists motherhood to incorporate her only understanding of mothering, sexuality.

Despite Clemencia’s adamant dislike and disapproval of her mother, this woman remains in her every thought and action. Cisneros’s captivating portrayal of an abandoned daughter reveals that Clemencia desperately needs a positive female figure. Cisneros reiterates that until Clemencia discovers an empowering mother/goddess to combat the shortcomings of her biological mother, she will be unable to move beyond her mother’s crippling racist/ sexist notions and break away from her damaging relationships with men.

Like Cisneros, Morrison also utilizes the premise of negligent mothering to describe the cycle of broken women it creates in her novel *Paradise*. In *Paradise*,

Morrison describes the broken lives of the Convent women as well as the citizens of Ruby to illustrate the detrimental effects that the patriarchal social order has on the female characters' roles as mothers and daughters. Morrison creates a cast of female characters who encounter the raging battle of racism, sexism, and colonialism that women of color endure everyday. Her cast of wayward, tormented women disrupts the idyllic town of Ruby. As Morrison describes the broken lives of the women living inside and outside the "Convent," she stresses the need for a mother/goddess figure to repair the shortcomings of biological mothers.

As Morrison introduces the Convent women—Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas—Morrison reveals that each woman lacks a positive mother figure. Mavis's mother threatens to turn her over to an abusive husband, Pallas's mother steals her boyfriend, and Seneca's mother abandons her as a young child. Morrison weaves these tales of pain and abandonment to illustrate the tensions that exist in mother-daughter relationships and to emphasize how the male gaze can threaten the tenuous tie between mothers and daughters.

Mavis is the first character to arrive at the Convent. After fleeing from the clutches of her abusive husband and children, she finds herself stranded at the Convent on her way to California. Before she arrives, she experiences the socio-economic burdens of living in a lower class home. Like Clemencia's mother, Mavis struggles in her domestic duties and child-rearing skills. Morrison introduces Mavis in the text via a scene in which a local journalist interviews her over the tragic death of her babies. As the journalist asks Mavis questions, the reader quickly learns that Mavis's negligence resulted in the fatal mistake that killed her twin babies. By introducing Mavis through

this interview, Morrison allows the journalist to project Mavis to the public as a negligent mother. June asks her, “Is there something you want to say? Something you want others to know?” Mavis replies, “I can’t think of any. I guess I.” “So some good can come out of this awful tragedy?” June persists (22). Despite Mavis’s half-dazed appearance, the journalist is relentless in exposing her flaws as a mother. Hence, within the first few pages of the novel, Morrison introduces the paradigm of the “bad” mother. When the journalist asks Mavis questions and snaps pictures of her grieving family, the journalist is announcing to the public that Mavis is a negligent mother.

Despite her fatal mistake, throughout the interview Mavis appears alarmingly detached from the situation. It quickly becomes apparent that Mavis’s strange behavior stems from her husband’s constant physical and verbal abuse, which appears to take precedence over her grief for her children. As the journalist discusses the tragic loss of her children, Mavis refrains from disclosing her grief for her dead babies and instead revolves the interview around the petty needs of her husband. When the journalist asks Mavis why she even bothered to take the twins to the store, Mavis responds, “They wasn’t crying or nothing but he said his head hurt. I understood. I did. You can’t expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in front of him. I know that ain’t right” (23). Even though the more rational decision would seem to be to leave the infants at home, Mavis’s husband would have been infuriated. Similarly, instead of hurrying out of the supermarket for the sake of her babies locked in the car, she was hurrying to make sure she had a meal on the table for her angry husband. The fear of her husband is so strong she elevates his needs and desires above the safety of her children; as a result, throughout the entire interview,

she attempts to validate her actions as a wife rather than a mother and rather than voicing sorrow, pain, or blame over the death of her babies, Mavis fixates on her inability to properly care for her husband. As the interview indicates, Mavis's overwhelming fear for her husband overpowers all other emotions and thus robs her of the chance to properly grieve for her dead children. Her husband's power is stifling and oppressive, suffocating her just as the heat smothered the babies Merle and Pearle in the backseat of the Cadillac.

The theme of suffocation continues to appear throughout their relationship, as it even enters the marriage bed:

When he pulled her nightgown up, he threw it over her face, and she let that mercy be [...] Would it be quick like most always? Or long, wandering, collapsing in wordless fatigue? It was neither. He didn't penetrate—just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of hair through the nightgown that covered her face. She could have been a life-size Raggedy Ann. (26)

By placing Mavis's nightgown over her head, Frank physically suffocates and transforms her into an inanimate doll-like object. His sexual misconduct mimics the characteristics of the "macho" whom Paz describes in "Sons of La Malinche." Like the "macho," he has an incessant need for control, domination, and humiliation. Furthermore, his ambivalence towards his children and wife is fairly reminiscent of the social behavior that Jeanette Rodriguez discusses in her book *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women*. Rodriguez asserts, "men who show machismo are alleged to boast a great deal about their male conquests and refuse to do 'womanly'

things such as dishwashing, cooking, diaper-changing, or minding the children” (71). One can argue that Frank’s refusal to help his wife care for their children is what primarily causes the premature death of the infants. Thus, Morrison illustrates that in this case oppressive patriarchy results in infanticide. While Rodriguez and Paz might attribute this social expectation to Mexican or Mexican American culture, it accurately captures the conditions of all oppressive male patriarchy.

After this last humiliating sex act, Mavis decides that she must flee from her husband and family to the arms of her mother. However, Mavis’s decision to return home does not exactly provide the best environment for condolences and nurturance. For example, when Mavis unexpectedly arrives home, her mother Birdie “is not pleased” (30). Birdie’s initial response to her daughter’s unannounced visit is “Girl, you look like a bat out of hell...” and “I could see this coming, you know. Anybody could [...] Don’t need more’n a mosquito’s brain” (30). While Birdie does welcome Mavis into her home by providing physical care—food, clothing, and shelter—she is unable to offer emotional support. While she proclaims that she is not surprised over her daughter’s nervous breakdown, she fails to provide any type of condolence for her daughter’s expected grief. Instead Birdie equates her mothering duties in economic terms and provides Mavis with clothes, food, shelter, and money, rather than comfort and support. When Mavis questions her mother as to why she failed to appear at her babies’ funeral, her mother flippantly answers, “I had to choose—help bury them or pay for a trip. I couldn’t afford to do both. I told you all that” (31). Birdie views her motherly duties in economic levels, believing that because she has provided her daughter monetary support she has provided emotional support. Because capitalism is typically considered a component of Western

patriarchal culture, by Birdie equating mothering to capitalistic value Morrison exemplifies how patriarchy has hindered her mothering ability.

Furthermore, Birdie cannot accept that Mavis abandoned her family because it breaks down the normative family structure. Disturbed by her daughter's refusal to return home, Birdie attempts to restore her daughter back to the nuclear family structure by reminding her, "You still have children. Children need a mother" (31). For Birdie, a mother to physically abandon her children is unacceptable and so she feels she must do everything in her power to keep Mavis in the domestic sphere. Finally, Mavis decides to reveal to her mother the fear that exists in her home. She admits to her mother that she escaped, not because of the overwhelming grief for her babies, but because of the terror her husband and children invoke within her:

They have no right to kill me.

What?

He's making the other children do it.

What do what? Speak up so I can hear what you saying.

I'm saying they are going to kill me.

They? Who? Frank? What they?

All of them. The kids too.

Kill you? Your children? (31).

Mavis's outburst instantly disturbs and offends Birdie. Rather than listening to her daughter's cry for help, she silences Mavis by threatening to turn her over to her abusive husband. She "told Mavis she could stay if and only if she never talked that way again.

That she wouldn't tell Frank, if he called back, or anybody else that she was there, but if she said one more word about killing she would call him right away" (32). Birdie fails to recognize the severity of her daughter's situation, and in the end, she chooses to sacrifice her daughter in order to reinforce the normative patriarchal structure. For Birdie, it is unfathomable for a mother to leave a husband and children, and therefore, she betrays Mavis by calling Frank and revealing her whereabouts. Birdie finds a woman whom she chooses herself over her children deeply threatening and perverse, and so she reinforces the patriarchal structure by attempting to literally hand her daughter back to her oppressor, husband.

Mavis's troubling relationship with her mother affects not only her own life, but also results in her shortcomings as a mother to her daughter Sal. Since she suffers from an abusive relationship with her mother and husband, she is unable to provide a positive image to her own children, and more specifically her daughter. Mavis's inability to protect herself from her husband devolves into a profound fear—a fear not for her daughter, but of her daughter. Mavis reads the shift in her daughter Sal's behavior as threatening and aggressive. When the journalist interviews Mavis, Sal is glued to her side, and “rested her head on her mother's shoulder while she clenched the flesh at Mavis's waist” (22). Mavis reads Sal's gesture as an act of violence, believing that “Sal's fingernails [are]...diving for blood” (21). Mavis is so ingrained in her personal fear of her husband that she is unable to recognize that her daughter is crying out for love and attention. Her daughter's response could also portray the characteristics of an abused child, yet Mavis's own abuse prevents her from recognizing her daughter's cry for help. While Mavis does break from the patriarchal order to save herself, to do so she sacrifices

her relationship with her daughter. Mavis's abandonment simply perpetuates the cycle of abandonment in her family. Birdie emotionally abandons Mavis and in turn, Mavis physically abandons Sal. Mavis is unable to protect her daughter from the abuse of her husband, and therefore, she chooses to sacrifice her daughter so she may save herself and discover freedom.

If on the surface Mavis epitomizes the "negligent mother," then Seneca, the third woman to arrive at the Convent, signifies the abandoned daughter. As an adult and child, Seneca has suffered from severe physical and emotional abandonment. At the age of five, she is left to fend for herself by her sister/mother. For six days, five-year-old Seneca waited day and night for her sister to reappear. As a child, Seneca internalizes her sister's abandonment as contingent upon her behavior:

She began to understand why Jean was gone and how to get her back. She cleaned her teeth and washed her ears carefully. She also flushed the toilet right away, as soon as she used it, and folded her socks inside her shoes [...] She remembered the Lorna Doones that were in the bread box but dared not climb up on a chair to open it. Those were her prayers: if she did everything right without being told, either Jean would walk in or when she knocked on one of the apartment doors, there she'd be! Smiling and holding out her arms. (127)

Seneca's childhood abandonment translates into her incessant desire to please others so as not to face further rejection. As an adult she recognizes that throughout her entire life she has never truly felt the love of a mother—"Well cared for, loved, perhaps, by the

mothers in both of the foster homes, she knew it was not her self that the mothers had approved of but the fact that she took reprimand quietly, ate what given, shared what she had and never ever cried” (135).

Seneca’s desire to please may have been an adaptation that allowed her to survive in foster care, yet it also leaves her an easy target for abuse and objectification. In her life, she suffers from a string of sexual and physical abuses. Because of her lack of maternal care, she is so desperate for female companionship and love that she allows herself to become a plaything to rich Norma Fox: “the chauffeur had picked her up for Norma like a stray puppy. No, not even like that. But like a pet you wanted to play with for a while—a little while—but not keep. Not love. Not name it. Just feed it, play with it. Then return it to its own habitat” (138). Seneca has been treated “like a pet” her entire life. Yet, like a stray dog she is repeatedly thrown back on the streets again and again.

However, rather than getting angry at her abusers, Seneca rationalizes her mistreatment as an internal flaw—“by then she knew that there was something inside her that made boys snatch her and men flash her” (260). As a way to maintain her sanity, Seneca turns to cutting, and ever since she was a child, she has cut into her flesh as a way to release her torment and anguish. The first time she purposely cuts herself is to attract the attention of her foster mother, Mother Greer:

The habit, begun in one of the foster homes, started as an accident. Before her foster brother [...] got her underwear off for the first time, a safety pin holding the waist of her jeans together where a metal button used to be opened and scratched her stomach as Harry yanked on them... When

Mama Greer bathed her, she clucked, “Poor baby. Why didn’t you tell me?” and Mercurochromed the jagged cut. She was not sure what she should have told: the safety pin scratch or Harry’s behavior. So she pin-scratched herself on purpose and showed it to Mama Greer. (260)

Ever since that pivotal moment where Seneca received a moment of tenderness from a female, she copes with her internal pain through the physical release of cutting. She thus creates physical and emotional trauma upon her body that leaves her unable to forge healthy and positive relationships with women until she arrives at the Convent.

While Mavis and Seneca portray the hardships of mothering on an individual level, Morrison utilizes the little town of Ruby to illustrate what occurs when there is a lack of effective mothering at the communal level. At first glance the town appears as though it is a suburban utopia. Despite its idyllic appearance, the town and its inhabitants are suffering from the same abuses as the Convent women. In particular, Morrison parallels the Convent’s broken and battered women to the “elegant black women” of Ruby (111). Behind the town’s mask of perfection lie cracks and fissions that threaten to rip the families and town apart. The town is so far embedded into hyper-masculinity that the community at large suffers from a lack of effective mothering. By paralleling the obvious brokenness of the Convent women to the well-kept women of Ruby, Morrison stresses that regardless of wealth and class, the male gaze inflicts harm upon the mother-daughter relationship. Morrison best exemplifies the festering growth of sexism and racism within the town by highlighting the abusive relationship between respected teacher Patricia Best and her daughter Billie Delia.

The relationship between Patricia and her daughter personifies the issues Alarcón and hooks describe in their writing. Ever since Billie Delia was born, Patricia has been unable to protect her daughter from the male gaze of Ruby. Patricia recognizes that within the town she and her daughter are a liability because of their light skin color. Within Ruby, the townspeople judge one another according to the darkness of skin. Patricia refers to the townspeople who have the coveted skin shade “blue-back” as “8-rock,” as she compares their darkness of skin to the “deep, deep level in the coal mines” (193). Because the town is divided by racial purity, “light-skinned against black,” Patricia understands the importance of having 8-rock blood (194). In her journal she writes, “Daddy, they hate us because Mama looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rock like you, like them I passed the skin on to my daughter, as you and everybody knew I would” (196). Billie Delia’s “sunlight” skin represents the infiltration of whiteness, and thus the community views her as a traitor (197).

Billie Delia’s skin not only separates her from the community, but her beauty and childish abandonment turns her into the town scapegoat. Ever since a three-year-old Billie Delia innocently “pull[ed] down her panties in the street,” she has been viewed as a provocative and sexual being (203). And now, as a young woman, “Suddenly there was a dark light in the eyes of boys who felt comfortable staring at her. Suddenly a curious bracing in the women, a looking-away look in the men. And a permanent watchfulness in her mother” (151). Billie Delia’s image as a sexual object allows her to become a Malinche-like figure for the 8-rock community. Like La Malinche, she is categorized as “treacherous, passive, and willingly violated” (Rodriguez 75).

Patricia Best is unable to cope with her daughter's light coloring, and sexuality. Although on the surface Patricia attempts to provide an image of the ideal woman, "train[ing] herself to reasoning and soft manners and discretion and dignity," she fails to uphold this image in her relationship with her daughter (203). Her inability to protect her daughter from the male gaze results into an abusive relationship with her daughter. Patricia finally realizes after a particularly vicious and violent fight with Billie Delia that "the royal ease in her hand as she ran up the stairs was there to smash the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks, not the girl her daughter was" (204). Living in a town that scapegoats her daughter leaves Patricia unable to love and accept her fully. She "realize[s] that ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow" (203).

Rather than disrupt the patriarchal order, Patricia chooses to assume the male gaze when viewing her daughter. When alone, Patricia finds herself questioning her actions, "But the question for her now in the silence of this here night was whether she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her. And was she sacrificing her still?" (203). In the end, she refuses to believe in her daughter's virginity and instead chooses to believe that Billie Delia is a whore.

In one variation of the Malinche story, Malinche was sold into slavery by her parents (Alarcón 185). According to this variation, "the mother eager to please her new husband agrees to sell her daughter, and therefore changes her destiny" (185). Malinche's mother in turn becomes a "mother who cannot bear to see herself reflected in her daughter's mirror/sexuality, prefers to shatter the image/mirror, negate the daughter and thereby perpetuate rejection and negation" (185). Patricia's actions adhere to this myth,

as she chooses “to shatter the image/mirror” and “negate [her] daughter” so that she may continue to exist peacefully in her town. Just like Malinche’s mother, Patricia sacrifices her relationship with her daughter so that she may survive in a patriarchal society.

Morrison further exemplifies how the severed mother-daughter relationship leads to hatred among women through the initial relationships of the Convent women. When Mavis first encounters Gigi at the Convent, she is immediately threatened by another female presence. She protests to Connie, “I’ve been here three years, and this house is where we are. Us. Not her” (77). After a brief hiatus from the Convent, Mavis arrives to discover Gigi sunbathing in the nude. Her initial reaction to Gigi is contempt and disdain, as Gigi taunts her with the “exaggerat[ed] switch of the cheeks she had offered Mavis” (76). Gigi is so ingrained in this male myth that she utilizes her sexuality as a weapon against other women, using her naked body to mock and anger Mavis. Gigi purposely hurts Mavis by using the tools of their male oppressors: “Nobody’s fucked you in ten years, you dried-up husk” (168). Mavis is “stung by Gigi’s reference to her sexlessness,” and retaliates with physical blows (171). During one of their most vicious fights, Morrison further emphasizes the impact of the male gaze, as a male onlooker watches in disgust and arousal:

The driver slowed, maybe to get around the Cadillac hogging the road, maybe to offer help, but he stayed long enough to see outlaw women rolling on the ground, dresses torn, secret flesh on display. And see also two other women embracing in the back seat. For long moments his eyes were wide. Then he shook his head and gunned the motor of his truck.

(169)

In this instance, the women are doubly objectified. First, their relationship has been tainted by the sexual competition that patriarchy creates, and second, a male onlooker further demeans them by eroticizing their fight into a sexual act. The pervasiveness of the male myth has infiltrated all facets of Mavis and Gigi's lives, preventing the women from uniting in their shared struggles and becoming sisters.

As Cisneros and Morrison describe the relationships that exist among the mothers and daughters of "Never Marry a Mexican" and *Paradise*, the authors illustrate how the oppressive patriarchy transcends race and class to tear apart the mother-daughter relationship. The lack of positive mother-daughter relationships within the texts further emphasizes the importance of an uplifting mother/goddess figure to counteract the patriarchal forces that hinder mothering. Forging an alternative mother-daughter bond that exists beyond the oppressive walls of male patriarchy is essential for the women's discovery of self-love.

### CHAPTER III

#### DISCOVERING SACRED FEMININE SPACES IN *WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK* AND *PARADISE*

One of us is going to  
occupy the other to death  
One of us is going to emerge sobbing  
with sorrow from the bloody  
remnant of the other.

“The Occupant” –Gloria Anzaldúa

For African American and Mexican American women physical and social locality have a profound influence on their minds, bodies, and spirits. In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Central Politics*, bell hooks discusses the profound role of the homeplace on African American women, an importance she traces back to slavery: “historically African American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political domination” (42). [H]ooks discusses how “black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where [they] could restore to [themselves] the dignity denied to [them] on the outside in the public world” (42). Even now, a century

and a half after slavery has ended, the “homeplace” continues to serve as a place of resistance because it gives African American women a space free of the racist and sexist beliefs that exist in patriarchal culture. [H]ooks argues that the “homeplace” is essential for African American women “to grow and develop to nurture their spirits” because they “could not learn to love or respect themselves in the culture of white supremacy” (42).

Like hooks, Chicana writers and theorists have discussed the necessity for Chicanas to assert a space of their own, domestically, socially, and politically. In *homegrown*, Amalia Mesa-Bains comments on the inner workings of female space on the domestic level. Mesa-Bains points out that even in the kitchen, a locale designated as a female space, there remains “domestic tension” (16). She reiterates that once men enter the space, it immediately changes (16). She recalls how in her childhood kitchen her “mother, [her] tía, [her] grandmother, [her] godmother, and [her] cousins created a world where they would talk about men, or talk about what they needed to do for us as children. They seemed to have an alliance with each other, and to know that they were at odds at times, with the men in our family” (16). Even though the women are able to create a “homeplace” within the kitchen, it remains problematic because “while there was a sense of resistance, it was never direct” because it is “always expected that [they] would have to silently resist” (16).

In order for women to truly resist male patriarchy, Chicana theorist Emma Pérez finds it is imperative for a women of color to “(re)claim her own ‘sitio y lengua’” (“space and language”; 48). An important part of creating safe and empowering spaces involves speaking out and utilizing language to express one’s self. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Gloria Anzaldúa references the difficulty she and other Chicanas have in expressing themselves verbally due to *Marianismo*'s silent suffering model of womanhood and society's derogatory view of Chicano Spanish (80). According to Anzaldúa's personal experience, "Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language" (80). Anzaldúa describes the damage this inflicts upon Chicanas when she says, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language I can't take pride in myself" (81). Like Pérez, she maintains that for women of color to assert their autonomy, they must un-colonize their tongues.

The struggles that these female writers describe mirror the experiences of the female characters in *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Paradise*. Despite their differing cultures, as women of color they exist between cultures, homelands, and languages, all while living with the constraints of white patriarchy. Analyzing the physical, societal, and familial structures within the texts reveal that the masculine spaces of "Never Marry a Mexican," "Little Miracles," and *Paradise* are damaging to the female characters. I find it is only through carving out sacred feminine spaces, creating female centered communities and discovering their voice, that the women are able to discover and honor the mother goddess. Whether these spaces are physical "homeplaces" such as the Convent in *Paradise*, or social, such as the role of the mistress, it is essential to create niches within or outside the patriarchal structure where women may think, act, and create freely.

In *Paradise*, Morrison discusses the necessity of female-centered communities by juxtaposing repressive masculine spaces against liberating female spaces. In her novel,

she outlines the crippling effects of male patriarchy through her portrayal of the fictional town of Ruby. At first glance, the town appears quiet, peaceful, and quaint. When people drive through Ruby their “immediate impression of the little town was how still it was, as though no one lived there” (45). Despite its idyllic appearance, the ill effects of patriarchy, sexism, and racism manifest themselves in every aspect of the town.

The town of Ruby is ironically built upon the premise of racial inequality. The creation of the town began at the turn of the century when a band of newly freed men traveled from Louisiana to Oklahoma in search of a homeplace. The men were rejected by town after town, turned away from white, Native American, and black communities because of their coal-black skin and tired appearance:

On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana purchases to Oklahoma, the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built. (13)

During the plight, the clan walked for miles on end, preventing them from adequately protecting and providing for their wives and children. The inability to properly provide for their families caused irrevocable psychological damage within the 8-rock men: “It was the shame of seeing one’s pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it

threatened to crack open their bones” (95). [H]ooks argues in her book *We Real Cool* that an integral component of patriarchy is the protection of women. After researching slave narratives, she detects that “the image of black masculinity that emerges from slave narratives is one of hardworking men who longed to assume full patriarchal responsibility for families and kin” (4). Although the men deeply “longed” to protect and provide for their families, they were unable to do so. Instead, they were subjected to witnessing their wives and children face constant ridicule and rejection from other communities. Not only was slavery physically and psychologically emasculating, their inability to protect their families further disempowered the men. Because of the trauma of slavery and the humiliation of “the disallowing,” the subsequent male generations of Ruby grow up with an intense fear of emasculation.

Since “the disallowing” prevented the 8-rock clan from joining other towns, they were forced to start their own community, which they called Haven, a place where “neither the founders...nor the descendents could tolerate anybody but themselves” (13). Despite the townspeople’s efforts to distance themselves from the influence of whites, they are deeply embedded in the same racist and sexist ideology of white supremacy. The townsmen’s decision to discriminate according to racial purity illustrates how ingrained the men are in the ideology of white supremacy. It is thus no surprise that the men adopt the mentality of their oppressors, for “it must be emphasized that the black men who are most worried about castration and emasculation are those who have completely absorbed white-supremacist patriarchal definitions of masculinity” (*We Real Cool* 10).

Consequently, after enduring slavery and the “disallowment,” the men feel their greatest task is to protect their families and homes from outside influence. Any type of

infiltration from the outside world is corrupt and threatening, the rest of society “a void where random and organized evil erupted [...] and children were sport [and] your women quarry” (16). Despite the townsmen’s efforts to remain secluded in Haven, eventually the times encroach upon the town. After World War II and “Haven residents were leaving” the descendents of the forefathers decided to resurrect the town and “repeat what the Old Fathers had done in 1890” (16). In hopes of avoiding all interaction with the outside world, they plunged further and further into the countryside, hoping that if they went deeper into the expansive west they would be free from the dangers that lay “Out There” (13). However, when the men create the new community of Ruby they are unable to recognize that perhaps the dangerous threats are not outside, but that the “most scary things [lie] inside” (39).

The grandsons of Haven’s founder Zacariah Morgan—Steward and Deacon Morgan—adopt the mentality of their forefathers, recreating a town that is perhaps even more stifling and oppressive than the world they are trying to escape from. While the twins did not grow up during slavery or directly experience “the disallowing,” they re-live these traumatic events through the stories and teachings of their father and grandfather. In *We Real Cool*, hooks argues that African American males are often “taught to believe that the world is against them, that they are doomed to be victims; they assume the posture of the victimizer. First embracing the ideals of patriarchal masculinity that make domination acceptable, they then draw upon misogyny and sexism to experience their first use of violence, psychological or physical, to control another human being” (61). Deacon and Steward as well as the majority of the 8-rock men fit this model

because they too have ingrained the teachings and insecurities of their forefathers and “embrace the ideals of patriarchal masculinity” (61).

Not surprisingly, the African American men of Ruby abide by the same gender roles that exist in Mexican American culture. The townsmen’s hyper-masculinity mimics the machismo behavior that Octavio Paz finds characteristic of Mexican men. Like the violent characteristics of “the *macho*,” hooks suggests that African American men who “embrace the ideals of patriarchal masculinity” also “use violence [whether] psychological or physical, to control another human being” (61). In this case, the townsmen, like “the *macho*,” apply their violent behavior against the women who fail to adhere to Ruby’s societal norms. Like Paz, hooks feels this behavior stems from a historical event and argues, “black folks established domestic households that mirrored the brutal arrangements they had known in slavery” (132).

This behavior creates tension in all facets of life, but specifically in the domestic sphere. The townsmen’s desire to “control human beings” primarily reveals itself through their overwhelming need to protect the women of Ruby. Even though times are altering, the men are unable to relinquish their grip on the wives and daughters of the town.

Since both African American and Mexican American men exhibit tendencies of hyper-masculinity, it is not surprising that the townsmen of Ruby view women according to a mother/whore dichotomy that mimics the Virgin/Malinche paradigm. As in *Marianismo*, the African American women are expected to uphold the qualities of the self-effacing and enduring mother and to remain safely tucked away in the domestic sphere. The men take pride in the “quiet white and yellow houses full of industry; and in

them were elegant black women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting” (111). The men view the townswomen as dutiful wives and mothers such as Soane and Sweetie, or as whores, such as Billie Delia and Gigi. The women who neglect to meet their society’s expectations are subject to extreme ostracism and violence.

Furthermore, the men’s behavior towards the women living inside and outside of Ruby reveals that they have an inherent obsession with female sexuality. As Octavio Paz discusses in “Sons of La Malinche,” Mexican men’s fear of rape stems from an unresolved historical event. Because of slavery and its brutality towards women, a fear of rape is installed within the men of Ruby. This fear creates a perverse aversion to and longing for female sexuality and results in intense hatred of women. Direct descendents of the forefather, Steward and Deacon Morgan are deeply engrained with hyper-masculinity. Consequently, it is no surprise that their nephew and protégé K.D exhibits the most disturbing and aggressive attitude towards women in the community. K.D encompasses the dangerous characteristics of “the *macho*” as he utilizes power and violence in all of his relationships with women. Whether he is slapping his girlfriend Arnette or attacking his mistress Gigi, K.D employs violence to assert his male dominance. K.D’s behavior is an indicator of the dangers of patriarchal mentality, as each subsequent generation continues to become more and more ingrained in patriarchal masculinity.

As an extension of the townsmen’s control, the men assume the role of the caretakers, the breadwinners, and even the meal-makers within the town. Ironically, Morrison employs a community oven to symbolize the town’s rampant masculinity.

When the town first formed, it was deeply embedded with slave-era mentality: “They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a white-man’s kitchen or nursed a white child. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the rape of women who worked in white kitchens was, if not a certainty, a distinct possibility—neither of which they could bear to contemplate...It was that thinking that made a community kitchen so agreeable” (99). While this community oven functioned as a meeting place for men and women to gather and cook, once Ruby has entered modernity there is no use for an outside oven. As the novel takes place in the 1970’s, the Oven is now obsolete. However, this place remains a site where the men feel powerful and in control, and it becomes a strictly masculine domain.

While the Oven is often associated with femininity, representing the womb and domesticity, the men’s desire for control is so incessant that they appropriate it from a feminine symbol into a masculine one. Furthermore, the words engraved into the Oven are the living and breathing testament of the men, as it states: “Beware the furrow of his brow” (93). While the community members often dispute over its meaning, the phrase connotes anger, violence, and control, as it is not only engraved into the Oven, but, forever engraved into the townsmen. This phrase dictates their lives and actions, becoming a living and breathing testament for the 8-rock men as they utilize it to justify their violent and sexist actions.

Morrison juxtaposes Ruby’s rigid patriarchal order with the abandoned Convent on the outskirts of town. Having once been a boarding school for Native American girls, the “Convent” was once as oppressive as Ruby. Before the sisters converted the Convent into a school, it was the home of an eccentric embezzler whose lust for “food, sex, and

toys” pervades throughout the house (71). Despite the sisters’ attempt to de-sex the house, there remain “female-torso candleholders in the candelabra hanging from the hall ceiling. The curls of hair winding through vines that once touched faces now chipped away. The nursing cherubim emerging from layers of pain in the foyer. The nipple-tipped doorknobs” (72). Despite these markers of perverse sexuality, once the mansion begins to deteriorate with age and abandonment, the Convent evolves from a pillar of patriarchy into a site of blessed maternal power.

Even with its bizarre exterior, the Convent provides maternal warmth and protection. Within the Convent, there are certain locations that play key parts in the women’s discovery of the mother goddess, such as the kitchen, the garden, and the cellar. All three places emphasize the mothering characteristics of the place as they exhibit characteristics of the womb. The kitchen is the heart of the Convent, safe, nurturing, and comforting. In fact, when Mavis first arrives at the Convent, she feels overwhelmed by the kitchen’s grand stature, yet when “[l]eft alone Mavis expected the big kitchen to lose its comfort. It didn’t. In fact, she had an outer-rim sensation that the kitchen was crowded with children—laughing? Singing?” (41). The kitchen invokes immediate feelings of warmth, and as each woman arrives at the Convent, she finds herself inexplicably drawn to it. The women spend the majority of their time, preparing meals, talking, and singing behind the kitchen’s soothing walls.

The Convent kitchen’s immediate warmth drastically differs from the townsmen’s pride and joy, the Oven. Morrison further contrasts the kitchen’s warmth by describing the Oven as hard and masculine. The Oven is “huge [and] flawlessly designed,” with metal plates “of barrel staves and busted axels, from kettles and bent nails” (7). The

juxtaposition of the kitchen's smells of food and sounds of laughter to the Oven's "busted" metal emphasizes how hardened and broken the men of Ruby truly are.

Morrison also utilizes rich imagery of cooking and food to illustrate the nourishment the Convent brings. Each woman that arrives at the Convent is immediately fed, feasting on the clean and simple food Connie has prepared. Even though at first the women will insist they are not hungry, upon instruction they dutifully taste Connie's simple cooking. Eating these home cooked meals provides a bodily pleasure for the women, "the fear, the bickering, the nausea...the tears in the dark—all of the day's unruly drama dissipated in the pleasure of chewing food" (179). They have become so physically and emotionally starved, they do not even realize how hungry they are for comfort, care, and a home cooked meal until they arrive at the Convent. In fact, Connie teaches her first lesson to Mavis through the act of cooking. In the kitchen, Connie instructs her:

"Come on...Make yourself useful."

Mavis frowned at the pecans and shook her head at the nutcrackers, picks and bowls Connie was assembling. "No," she said. "Think of something else I can do to help. Shelling that stuff would make me crazy."

"No it wouldn't. Try it." (41)

Connie admonishes Mavis and encourages her to try: "you give in too quick. Look at your nails. Strong, curved like a bird's—perfect pecan hands. Fingernails like that take out meat out whole every time. Beautiful hands, yet you say you can't. Make you crazy. Make me crazy to see good nails go to waste" (42). From Connie, Mavis learns the

usefulness of her body and begins to “admire her busy hands” (42). She learns that cooking, like art, provides a physical release. As Cisneros’ characters Chayo and Clemencia paint, Mavis discovers satisfaction from putting her hands to useful work. Not only does Mavis learn how to cook Connie’s soothing meals, she becomes responsible for feeding the love-hungry women living in the Convent. Ironically, it is Mavis, the woman who once resorted to buying “weenies” and “who couldn’t figure out or manage a simple meal, who relied on delis and drive-throughs, [who] now created crepe-like delicacies without shopping every day” (171).

A further indicator of the Convent’s nurturing ability is its abundant garden. The garden behind the Convent is vibrant with an overwhelming array of flowers, fruits, and vegetables. There are “flowers mixed in with or parallel to rows of vegetables. In some places staked plants grew in a circle, not a line, in high mounds of soil. Chickens clucked out of sight...a patch of melons. An empire of corn beyond” (41). The garden provides all the provisions that the women need and more. Besides the array of produce, their garden boasts the hottest peppers coveted by the townspeople of Ruby. The Convent is the only place that grows the fiery “purply black peppers...its relish lasted for years with proper attention and though many customers tried planting the seeds, the pepper grew nowhere outside the Convent’s garden” (11). Ruby’s inability to grow these coveted peppers further illustrates the barrenness of the town, and the fertility of Convent. While the Convent boasts rich soil that yields strong roots, the roots are shallow in Ruby. In contrast to the Convent’s abundance of fruits and vegetables, Ruby’s “front yards were given over completely to flowers for no good reason except there was time in which to do it. The habit, the interest in cultivating plants that could not be eaten, spread and so did

the ground surrendered to it” (89). The gardens of Ruby, while beautiful, are superficial as they lack the nourishment and sustainability of the Convent’s garden.

Lastly, the third significant location in the Convent is the cellar. While the kitchen may be the heart of the home, the cellar is where the women discover redemption and forgiveness. Before Connie transforms herself into the spiritual leader Consolata, the cellar gave her the darkness and privacy to grieve for her lost loves, Deacon and the Reverend Mother. Under ground she discovers a safe place where she can express her personal anguish, and once she becomes “Consolata Sosa,” she utilizes the cellar’s privacy to give the Convent women an intimate space to discuss their conflicted pasts. Soon, the cellar is transformed from her personal grieving place into an open space where the women can share their tormented secrets and release their demons. Its darkness and seclusion no longer hide the hidden pain of the Convent women, but allow for their atonement. Because of its darkness, one may think that the Convent women would find such a place frightening, but like the kitchen, it only offers comfort:

Pallas, bred in the oversight of Los Angeles, in houses without basements, associated them with movie evil or trash or crawly things. She gripped Seneca’s hand and breathed through her mouth. But the gestures were expressions of anticipated, not genuine alarm. In fact, as they climbed the stairs, images of a grandmother rocking peacefully, of arms, a lap, a singing voice soothed her. (176-77)

When the women first arrive at the Convent, they immediately begin to experience its soothing effects. Despite its oppressive size and the bizarre mixture of

Catholicism and perverse sexuality, the space provides immediate comfort. Connie instructs her houseguests that “lies [are] not allowed in this place. In this place every true thing is okay” (38). She immediately establishes the Convent as a safe place in which the women are encouraged to discuss their pasts. For the women, it is “like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too” (177). Without men and their patriarchal mentality to convolute their thinking and manipulate their actions, the women are able to transform themselves. Each woman discovers herself behind the Convent’s walls; in fact, the first time that Pallas enters the Convent she feels “as though she might meet herself her—an unbridled, authentic self, but which she thought of as a ‘cool’ self—in one of this house’s many rooms” (177). Like Pallas, Mavis also discovers a new version of herself, transforming from a weak housewife into a strong assertive woman, “as [now] the old Mavis [is] dead—the one who couldn’t defend herself...” (171). As each woman transforms herself during her time at the Convent, it is evident that this physical space has a profound influence on the women. Its “blessed malelessness” provides the women space to discover their “authentic” selves and self-love.

Besides Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas, the women of Ruby also utilize the Convent to escape from the rigid patriarchal system of Ruby. Women such as Lone, Soane, Billie Delia, and Sweetie all flock to the Convent to escape from the conflicts occurring in their lives. Sweetie, the mother of four sickly babies, lives the hard life of a martyr. She spends her days caring and tending to her sickly children, forsaking all care of herself so that she may be available to watch every move her babies make. “For six years she slept on the pallet near the cribs, or in bed with Jeff, her breath threaded, her ear tunnel ready, every muscle braced to spring” (125). Eventually one morning Sweetie

awakens and suffers from a complete nervous breakdown. After mindless, endless days and nights of not sleeping, she snaps:

The small thing she wanted was not to have that dawn coffee, the already drawn bath, the folded nightgown and then the watchful sleep [of her children] in that order, forever, everyday and in particular this here particular day. The only way to change the order, she thought, was not to do something differently but to do a different thing. Only one possibility arose—to leave her house and step into a street she had not entered in six years. (125)

After refusing to leave her home for the past six years, she walks hour after hour to the Convent. Throughout her walk to the Convent, Sweetie is strangely exhilarated, overwhelmed by the freedom she is finally experiencing. Her “stride [is] purposeful—as though there were somewhere important she had to be” (124). Once inside the Convent, the women flock to Sweetie “like birds” (129). The women “put her in a bed under so many blankets” and offer her food and drink. In the Convent, Sweetie is allowed to sleep for once without the incessant worry of her children. Sweetie’s escape to the Convent provides her the relief she so desperately needs from the painful monotony of caring for her children and husband. Sweetie’s nervous breakdown illustrates the grief and the helplessness that women experience day in and day out when they are trapped inside the domestic sphere. Morrison’s depressing portrayal of the self-effacing and enduring mother illustrates the necessity of breaking free and experiencing life outside of domesticity.

Like Sweetie, Billie Delia also utilizes the Convent to escape from her womanly conflicts. Labeled as the town's whore, Billie Delia is completely ostracized, forced to endure years of "a curious bracing in the women, a looking-away look in the men. [And worse,] a permanent watchfulness in her mother" (152). Her reputation not only leads to ridicule, but severe physical abuse from her mother. Similar to Clemencia, Billie Delia suffers from a broken relationship with her mother. After a particularly vicious fight in which her mother "fought her like a man," Billie Delia takes refuge in the Convent to recover from her bruised and purpled face (152). Staying in the Convent, Billie Delia finally experiences acceptance and "what she saw and learned there changed her forever (152). Billie Delia leaves the Convent profoundly affected, so much so that she passes on her enlightening experience of the Convent to Pallas, a young woman who appears at the health clinic where she works. She informs her of the Convent:

"This is a place where you can stay for a while. No questions. I did it once and they were nice to me. Nicer than—well, very nice. Don't be afraid. I used to be. Afraid of them, I mean. Don't see many girls like them out here." She laughed then. "A little nuts, maybe, but loose, relaxed, kind of [...] Anyway you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They'll take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it." (175-76)

Billie Delia's reference to the women's freedom stresses that the Convent is free of all social inhibitions and restraints. While the women of Ruby must abide by a rigid moral code and remain in the domestic sphere, those who stay at the Convent experience exhilarating freedom, and are offered the luxury of "collect[ing]" and finding themselves.

It is precisely this economic, religious, and sexual freedom that becomes so threatening to the townsmen of Ruby.

The absence of men in the Convent deeply disturbs the male citizens of Ruby, leading to an accusation that the women are perverse, hyper-sexual, and wicked Malinche-like figures. They are “not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven” (276). As the inner conflicts continue to ravage the community, the townsmen are unable to recognize their role in the downfall of Ruby, and so they scapegoat the Convent as the source of contention within the town:

Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year’s Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed [...] The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women. (11)

The threat of female sexuality is what ultimately drives the men to commit the unthinkable violent attack on the Convent women. When the men visit the home, Morrison illustrates the depraved image the men have of the women. While storming the Convent, the men believe the kitchen, bedrooms, and cellar display the women’s satanic

worship. Rather than recognizing the signs of goodness and productivity with the remains of vegetable chopping on the counter, and “stock simmering on the stove,” the men are only “alert to the female malice that hides here and the yeast-and-butter smell of rising dough” (5, 4). Morrison’s choice of diction to describe the men’s impression of the women is a complete contradiction of terms. Despite the normalcy and domesticity of “yeast and butter,” the men only view “malice.” Similarly, regardless of the orderliness of the kitchen and its comforting smells, the men view it as symptomatic of the women’s “slack[ness].” As the men continue to wander around the home, they misread each and every artifact within the home. Mavis’s baby shoes become evidence for the women’s “revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children” (8). Rather than viewing the women’s belonging as sentimental keepsakes, they read them as evidence of their evil minds. Despite their repulsion with the women’s bedrooms, they find the cellar, the location for the women’s divine healing as the central source of wickedness, referring to it as “the devil’s bedroom, bathroom and his nasty playpen” (17). They are determined “to expose its filth to the light [...] of the Oklahoma sky” (3).

Even though the men disdain the women, this kitchen conjures up images of home. In fact, one man remembers vividly his childhood and the way his mother tended to him when he was young. As this man reflects on his past, Morrison illustrates the combating notions of motherhood and patriarchal power. For example, as this man searches the kitchen, he “eyes the kitchen sink. He moves to the long table and lifts the pitcher of milk. He sniffs it first and then, the pistol in his right hand, he uses his left to raise the pitcher to his mouth, taking such long, measured swallows [...]” (7). Andrea O’Reilly finds that “the symbolism here is explicit: milk suggests maternal nourishment;

pistols, particularly in their phallic connotation, mark patriarchal power” (165). While milk represents the woman’s ability to give life and to nourish, the gun has the power to kill and destroy human life. This image beautifully demonstrates the tension that exists between maternal and patriarchal power and questions the possibility for these two powers to co-exist peacefully.

When the men finally discover the women fleeing from the Convent and prepare to open fire, they refer to them as “[b]odacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” (18). Eve or Mary, Malinche or Guadalupe, all women are mothers or whores. The women’s sexuality prevents them from being redeemed “by Mary,” by God, by patriarchy, and so the townsmen resort to gunning down the women as though they are “panicked does leaping toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game” (18). Morrison’s religious diction further exemplifies how embedded Christianity is in patriarchal masculinity, and how religion is utilized to disempower women.

Morrison’s portrayal of the townsmen’s hatred and violence deftly exposes the danger that exists in the patriarchal mentality. Interestingly, Morrison’s original title for *Paradise* was *War*, an indicator of the gender warfare that engulfs the male and female characters. The men’s misreading and ultimately their destruction of the Convent underscores the necessity of resistant feminine spaces.

Besides utilizing physical spaces to resist the dominant patriarchal order, the female characters also socially create their own space by holding untraditional gender roles. In “Never Marry a Mexican” and *Paradise*, Clemencia and Consolata both refuse

to adhere to societal norms of marriage and motherhood by engaging in affairs and becoming mistresses. While mistresses are most commonly viewed as negative, this controversial role allows the women to challenge and reject patriarchal norms. Helena Michie defines the mistress in her essay “Not One of the Family: The Repression of the Other Woman in Feminist Theory” as “the Other woman [...] the rival, sexual threat. She is, however, Other in several senses: she is the third world woman, the lesbian, the antifeminist, the one who is included from or resists the embrace of Oedipal sisterhood [...]” (60). Michie’s description of the mistress as “the Other” emphasizes that women of color who employ this social role are then “Othered” on multiple levels, socially, racially, and sexually.

In “Cisneros’s ‘Terrible’ Women: Recuperating the Erotic as a Feminist Source in ‘Never Marry a Mexican’ and ‘Eyes of Zapata,’” Maythee Rojas finds that because mistresses are “not bound by socially constructed morals or cultural practices, they possess a sense of motion, mutability, and, most importantly, agency that blurs gender-role expectations” (136). Furthermore, Rojas asserts that “their existence broadens the otherwise narrowly defined social categories and roles available to women” (137). In both instances, Clemencia and Consolata are deemed as the “Other” according to their social position, but also due to their gender and race. While at times both Clemencia and Connie’s sexual relationships hover between “oppression” and “liberation,” the outcomes of their sexual relationships lead to their discovery of the mother goddess.

Within the first few paragraphs of “Never Marry a Mexican,” Cisneros portrays Clemencia as the prototype of the stereotypical mistress, vindictive and guilty. Clemencia openly admits that she craves sexual attention from men and is drawn to the alluring

freedom that the role of the mistress brings. Clemencia finds this freedom intoxicating: “borrowed. That’s how I have had my men. Just the cream skimmed off the top. Just the sweetest part of the fruit, without the bitter skin that daily living with a spouse can rend” (69). Due to her aversion to monogamy, she refuses to marry: “I’ve never married and never will. Not because I couldn’t but because I’m too romantic for marriage. Marriage has failed me, you could say. Not a man exists who hasn’t disappointed me, whom I could trust to love the way I’ve loved. It’s because I believe too much in marriage that I don’t” (69). Clemencia’s refusal to marry directly retaliates against societal expectations as expressed through *Marianismo* and allows her to inhabit a radical social space that lies outside of her cultural limitations.

Cisneros stresses that Clemencia’s relationships are based upon control and domination rather than mutual love and respect. Cisneros employs the theme of the Conquest to describe Clemencia’s sexual relationships. Clemencia allows her body and home to become a physical space for men to occupy. She takes lovers in “dark bars, dark restaurants. And if not—[her] apartment with his toothbrush firmly planted in the toothbrush holder like a flag on the North Pole” (69). Alarmingly, Clemencia recognizes that her body is an act of conquest, and yet she willingly allows men to occupy her body and space. By portraying Clemencia’s relationships as acts of imperialism, Cisneros illustrates that although Clemencia abstains from marriage, she suffers from the damaging psychology of patriarchy.

Besides her sexual encounters, Clemencia allows her livelihood and eccentricity to turn her into an exotic subject. Clemencia fails to make ends meet, and so she must resort to numerous low-paying jobs: “Anyway you look at it, what I do to make a living

is prostitution. People say ‘a painter?’ How nice.’ And want to invite me to their parties, have me decorate the lawn like an exotic orchid for hire” (71). Yet, rather than refusing to appear and perform at these events because she finds it degrading, she chooses to allow the wealthy to view her as the “Other.” Even though she recognizes that she is an eroticized subject, she cannot find a way to break from these confining racist and sexist notions.

Because of Clemencia’s lack of income, job stability, and affairs, she lives haphazardly and in a state of drift, fleeing from class constraints:

I’m amphibious. I’m a person who doesn’t belong to any class. The rich like to have me around because they envy my creativity; they know they can’t buy that. The poor don’t mind if I live in their neighborhood because they know I’m poor like they are, even if my education and the way I dress keeps us worlds apart. I don’t belong to any class. Not the poor, whose neighborhood I share. Not to the rich, who come to my exhibitions and buy my work. Not to the middle class from which my sister Ximena and I fled. (72)

The statement that she “fled” from the middle class illustrates there is a great source of tension in the middle class home. She reveals that she is also homeless since her mother essentially evicted her from her childhood home after her father died. Thus, her decision to remain “classless” and to live outside the societal strata emphasizes how “placeless” Clemencia feels. She has no true job, class, or home, and thus socially and economically, Clemencia lives on the margins. Clemencia’s marginalization also reflects her experience

living between Mexican and American cultures. Linguistically, culturally, and socially, she exists in the space between Mexico and America, Spanish and English. Her cultural confusion manifests itself through language and her preference in men. Although Clemencia grew up speaking both languages, she often confuses English idioms and phrases, admitting, “I can’t ever get the sayings right even though I was born in this country” (73). Her difficulty articulating herself captures the difficulty she has negotiating between her two cultures.

Cisneros continues with the motif of colonialism through Clemencia’s relationship with her lover, Drew. As Cisneros describes Clemencia and Drew’s relationship, it becomes a modern-day re-enactment of La Malinche and Cortés as it is entangled and intertwined with the racist/sexist ideologies surrounding the Conquest. As the older, white male, Drew reins over Clemencia as Cortés did over La Malinche. And like a colonized subject, Clemencia relies on Drew to validate her language, culture, and body: “Drew remember when you used to call me Malinalli. It was a joke, a private game between us, because you looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours. My skin dark against yours. Beautiful you said, and when you said it I was” (74). Clemencia craves Drew’s attention, specifically when he incorporates her language in their lovemaking, “Malinalli, 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” (74). Clemencia’s sentiments describe the power that lies in language, as it is only when Drew, the colonizer, speaks her native tongue that she is able to love herself. Her inability to appreciate her body, culture and her language reiterates how voiceless and powerless she

is in her relationship with Drew. Consequently, she lacks the ability to articulate her own thoughts and feelings, allowing Drew to dictate the entire relationship.

Even years later, Clemencia remains entranced by Drew and she vividly remembers their past relationship when she is with his son, “I was your father’s student [...] And he took me under his wing and in his bed, this man, this teacher, your father. I was honored that he’d done me the favor. I was that young” (76). Cisneros parallels Clemencia’s admiration for Drew to the effect Cortés must have had over La Malinche. As it was an honor for La Malinche to aid Cortés, Clemencia feels privileged that Drew had “done [her] the favor.”

Besides being placeless, Clemencia appears powerless and voiceless in her relationship with Drew. In her previous relationships, she is a nameless body whom men are free to use, occupy, and then leave. This theme of occupation continues with her sexual relationship with Drew. Thinking of Drew, Clemencia remembers, “Before daybreak, you’d be gone, same as always, before I even knew it. And it was if I’d imagined you, only the teeth marks on my belly and nipples proving me wrong” (74). Drew comes in the night, leaving her nothing to remember him by but his teeth marks. By physically imprinting his mark upon her, he essentially brands her, showing to the world that she belongs to him and that he has conquered her.

At the end of their relationship, Clemencia recalls, “we had agreed. All for the best. Surely I could see that, couldn’t I? My own good. A good sport. A young girl like me. Hadn’t I understood... responsibilities. Besides, 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). It is evident from Clemencia’s memory that “we” didn’t decide anything; however, she internalizes Drew’s words and allows them to become her own.

Emma Pérez finds that voicelessness such as Clemencia’s is a conflict that many Chicanas experience. She writes, “we [Chicanas] have been spoken about, written about, spoken at but never spoken with or listened to. Language comes from above to inflict us with western-white-colonizer ideology” (62). Clemencia’s inability to assert herself to Drew is indicative of the Chicana experience. Drew utilizes his position and power to assert dominance over Clemencia and, placing his own words into her mouth, he further colonizes her.

Besides taking Clemencia’s voice, Drew’s words drip with sexism and racism. Acting as the colonizer, he must maintain his distance from Clemencia. Despite the fact that he is attracted to Clemencia’s “exoticness,” her race prevents her from being a viable mate. If he were to marry Clemencia and produce a child, he would forever taint his bloodline. Thus, he must remain with his “redheaded Barbie doll” wife and produce an Anglo heir (79). Drew’s rejection, combined with her mother’s teachings, leaves Clemencia feeling lost and powerless.

As Drew’s colonized subject, she is forced to step out of her *barrio* and into the colonizer’s white world. In her own home she is surrounded by familiar religious and cultural markers with Mexican bakeries outside her apartment and the candles of La Virgen de Guadalupe, El Niño Fidencio, Don Pedrito Jaramillo and Santo Niño de Atocha lit in her home (75). Drew’s house is a far cry from her eclectic and colorful space and in comparison it is stifling and oppressive. Clemencia remembers Drew’s

house as pristine: “immaculate, as always, not a stray hair anywhere, not a flake of dandruff or a crumpled towel. Even the roses on the dining-room table held their breath. A kind of airless cleanliness that always made me want to sneeze” (81). Stepping into Drew’s house creates an immediate physical reaction within Clemencia, as her desire to sneeze illustrates that she must expel this foreign air from her body.

Clemencia recognizes that she racially, socially, and culturally does not belong in Drew’s room and world. When she walks into the master bedroom, she finds herself completely surrounded by whiteness: “cotton balls, blonde hairpins. A pair of bone-colored sheepskin slippers,” “a white robe” (81). Even Drew’s wife’s make-up is muted, “her Estée Lauder lipsticks. Corals and pinks of course. Her nail polishes-mauve was as brave as she could wear” (81). Clemencia’s wrath and fear of whiteness manifests itself here in this bedroom as she views these expensive objects as the distinguishing characteristics that separate her from Drew’s wife Meghan. While she is encircled by upper class white markers, I imagine all she hears is her mother’s voice running through her head, “Never marry a Mexican. Never marry a Mexican.” Furthermore, everything in Drew and Meghan’s room is a testament to the Western world—Estée Lauder, “a white robe with a MADE IN ITALY label,” and a wooden babushka doll from Russia. These symbolic tokens are not only markers of whiteness, but symbolic of Drew and Meghan’s European descent. Clemencia feels that these objects belong to a world and culture to which she does not belong.

In *Paradise*, Morrison also utilizes the role of the mistress to discuss male-female gender roles and patriarchal domination. Like Clemencia, Morrison’s character Connie experiences entrapment and freedom in her role as a mistress. Having been raised and

colonized by Sister Mary Magna, Connie leads a very strict and pious life: “for thirty years she offered her body and her soul to God’s Son and His mother completely as if she had taken the veil herself” (225). Dutifully adhering to the tenets of *Marianismo*, she fervently devotes herself to a life of servitude and piety. As the nuns’ saved and adopted daughter, Connie attempts to become the “perfect” daughter to Sister Mary by dutifully spending her life serving God and others. Whilst living with the nuns in the Convent “Consolata slept in the pantry, scrubbed tile, fed chickens, prayed, peeled, gardened, canned and laundered” to prove her loyalty (225).

It is not until Connie is a mature woman of thirty-nine that she feels her first twinges of desire. Living in the convent for thirty years, the sisters have denied her homeland, culture, and sexuality. The rigid doctrines of Catholicism and the nuns’ repulsion for sexuality prevent her from appreciating her own femininity and sensuality. They teach her to abstain from sexual practices by encouraging her to “smash [the Convent’s] offending marble figures and tend bonfires of books, crossing herself when naked lovers blew out of the fire and had to be chased back to the flame” (225). Despite the nuns’ attempts to rid Connie of her culture and sexuality, the first time she lays eyes on Deacon she recalls the sights and sounds of her homeland: “As Consolata watched that reckless joy, she heard a faint but insistent Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. Then a memory of just such skin and just such men, dancing with women in the streets to music beating like an infuriated heart, torsos still, hips making small circles above legs moving so rapidly it was fruitless to decipher how such ease was possible” (226).

Viewing Deacon for the first time not only brings up distant memories of her homeland, but it also awakens sexual desire. While watching this man she hears the

seductive, intoxicating rhythm of Brazil's Samba that matches the pulses of her rushing blood: "She saw him for the first time. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. A lean man astride on horse leading another. His khaki shirt was soaked with sweat [...] his hips were rocking in the saddle, back and forth. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. Consolata saw his profile, and the wing of a feathered thing, undead, fluttered in her stomach" (226). Despite the Reverend Mother's incessant teachings of piety, "those thirty years of surrender to the living God cracked like a pullet's egg when she met the living man" (225).

Connie's feelings for Deacon are overwhelming and consuming. In this relationship, she discovers a part of herself she never knew existed. Before Deacon, she "never knew any male or want[ed] to, which must have been why being love-struck after thirty celibate years took on an edible quality" (228). Despite her exhilaration and joy, Connie holds very little power or control with this "living man" (234). Deacon dominates the relationship, coming and going as he pleases. The weeks that he fails to show at their special meeting place leave Connie full of anguish: "The regularity of their meetings... [once] smoothed her hunger to a blunt blade. Now irregularity knifed" (236). Connie's inability to control their relationship leaves her vulnerable and powerless.

Morrison portrays Connie as weak, passive, and desperate, so much so that her years of loneliness and celibacy leave her physically ravenous for this man. Her longing for love, sex, and companionship distort her feelings into a cannibalistic desire that ruins their relationship:

Consolata had lost him. Completely. Forever [...] Consolata remembered his face. Not when she bit his lip, but when she had hummed over the

blood she licked from it. He'd sucked air sharply. Said, 'Don't ever do that again.' But his eyes, first startled, then revolted, had said the rest of what she should have known right away. Clover, cinnamon, soft old linen—who would chance pears and a wall of prisoner wine with a woman bent on eating him like a meal? (239).

Connie's intense fervor for love, affection, and human touch results in her attempt to devour the man she loves. In this action, Connie overturns their relationship as she becomes the dominant sexual partner, the "*chignon*," and he becomes the victim, the "*chingada*." Connie's sexual assertiveness leads Deacon to view her as an "uncontrollable gnawing woman [...] who had tried to trap a man, close him up in a cellar room with liquor to enfeeble him so they could do carnal things, unnatural things in the dark" (279-80). Both Clemencia and Connie utilize their sexuality as a way to exert power over men. Like Drew, Deacon finds Connie's sexuality threatening, and so he must regain complete control by rejecting her.

Connie's cannibalistic desire delves much deeper than an expression of sexual desire; it encompasses her yearning for culture and homeland. After realizing that her actions cost her love, she now fully understands what she was craving: "I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go home" (240). Even years later, her heartache remains acute because she understands that in losing Deacon, she loses an extension of herself and a greater cultural community. Connie cries, "But he, but he.' Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha, she wanted to say meaning, he and I are the same" (241). Connie recognizes a piece of herself in Deacon, which enables her to forge a tie to the African Diaspora. Thus, her desire to ingest a piece of Deacon signifies her true desire to become part of a larger

cultural community. Her relationship with Deacon remains the only true connection she holds to her distant past and culture, and consequently she is unable to move beyond this heartbreak until she discovers an empowering mother figure.

Like Clemencia, it takes a sexual relationship for Connie to appreciate her body and sexuality. It is not until Deacon looks at her that she truly sees herself as a woman. Growing up alone on the streets of Brazil, Connie was a victim of sexual abuse. She internalizes the sexual abuse she experienced as a child and “never after the white hand had enclosed her filthy paw, did she know any male nor want to, which must have been why being love-struck after thirty years took on an edible quality” (228). Connie’s sexual abuse combined with her Catholic upbringing translates into a thwarted view of herself and her sexuality. It is not until she meets Deacon that she begins to view herself as a desirable woman. When Deacon tells her, “I’ve traveled. All over. I’ve never seen anything like you. How could anything be put together like you? Do you know how beautiful you are? Have you looked at yourself?” “I’m looking now” (231). Like Clemencia, Connie needs the male gaze to affirm that she is a desirable woman. As exotic Others, the women require the colonizers’ sexual gaze before they recognize their beauty.

Connie’s sexual relationship challenges her Catholic upbringing and the prescribed gender norms the nuns thrust upon her. Before Connie met Deacon, her days were a monotonous blur full of domestic tasks. However, while undergoing her sexual awakening, she rejects her chores and the nuns’ orders, choosing to spend her time with Deacon or daydreaming. While utilizing this time, Connie discovers a sensual side to herself that she never knew existed. Like Clemencia, in her newfound role of the mistress

she is free from the constraints of marriage and domesticity. Unlike the wives of Ruby, she is not expected to spend her days attending to the needs of men and children; rather, she is free to spend her time as she wishes. In many ways, she is like Clemencia in that she socially and physically situates herself on the margins. By marginalizing herself, Connie does not have to conform to the strict patriarchal structure of the Convent and Ruby, and she remains free of family obligation and responsibility. Her sexual awakening acts as a catalyst, bringing forth change and a rare sequence of events that tests her Catholic upbringing. Her relationship with Deacon and her newfound interest in her body and sexuality reconnects her to her Afro-Brazilian culture and begins the chain of events that lead to her transformation into a mother/goddess.

While Clemencia and Connie openly defy gender norms by occupying an untraditional role in society, in “Little Miracles,” the young protagonist Chayo struggles to find her proper place in society. In “Little Miracles” Cisneros tackles the gender norms of Mexican American culture by illustrating the feelings of grief and helplessness they invoke within Chayo. In the short story, Chayo finds that there is literally no space, no place for her within her gender, family, and culture. In Chodorow’s book *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* she states:

In the development of gender identification for girls it is not the existence of core gender identity, the unquestioned knowledge that one is female, that is problematic. Rather, it is the later-developed conflicts concerning this identity [...] The difficulties that girls have in establishing a “feminine” identity [...] arise from identification with a negatively-valued gender category, and an ambivalently experienced maternal figure, whose

mothering and femininity, often conflictual for the mother herself, are accessible, but devalued. (110-11)

Chodorow's findings describe why Chayo struggles so intensely with her female identity. Growing up and witnessing how her mother and grandmother cater to her father and suffer from his abuse, causes Chayo to view marriage and motherhood "accessible but devalued." As Chodorow mentions, she cannot help but feel that her gender is "devalued," and thus she realizes that if she were to perform these expected duties she too would be "devalued." Since marriage and motherhood are the expected norms in Mexican culture, Chayo finds her disinterest in these womanly duties compromise her female identity. As a result, Chayo feels displaced within her gender and culture and is unable to understand her body and sexuality.

Chayo feels so completely lost that she describes herself as a "bell without a clapper. A woman with one foot in this world and one foot in that. A woman straddling both. This thing between my legs, this unmentionable" (125). Growing up, Chayo has been taught to deny her sexuality, a commonality amongst women in Mexican American culture. In "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" Cisneros describes her own sexual naïveté and the limitations it places upon her and other young Chicanas. She remembers the guilt and shame she experienced as she matures into a young woman and begins to explore her sexuality. She finds that "in the guise of modesty [her] culture lock[s] [women] in a double chastity belt of ignorance and *veregüenza*, shame" (46). As Cisneros describes in her essay, *Marianismo* leaves young Chicanas such as Chayo unaware of their own bodies and reproductive health. Furthermore, Chayo's inability to name her genitals further illustrates her lack of awareness and embarrassment of her body. Since Chayo is

unable to adhere to the gender norms of her culture and identify with her gender, she feels lost as a woman.

Cisneros understands the harm that *Marianismo* inflicts upon Chayo by describing her isolation and her desire to remain unmarried and childless. Her family does not understand her passion for painting and is more concerned with her marital status than her dreams and goals. Her family constantly emphasizes that her rightful place is in the home as a wife and mother. She hears the incessant voice of her friends and family in her ears:

*Chayoito, when you getting married?*

*How many kids you want when you grow up?*

*You'll change. You'll see. What till you meet Mr. Right [...]*

*When you become a mother. (126)*

As a woman, she is expected to perform mundane domestic tasks rather than pursue her love for painting and education. Despite her prescribed life of domesticity she cannot help but question her role: “Do boys think and girls daydream? Do only girls have to come out and greet the relatives and smile and be nice and *quedar bien*? (126).

Chayo finds herself alone in her quest for freedom and independence: “no one else in my family, no other woman, neither friend nor relative, no one I know, not even the heroine in the *telenovelas*, no woman wants to live alone. [But] I do” (127). Since Chayo cannot identify with the meek and mild mothers surrounding her, she withdraws from her family and closes herself off from the traditional Guadalupe. To Chayo, La

Virgen only represents suffering, and within her, she only sees the perpetual pain of her mother and grandmother. She reveals to Guadalupe, “Couldn’t look at you without blaming you for all the pain my mother and her mother and all our mothers’ mothers have put up with in the name of God” (127). Since Chayo cannot idolize a figure that subjects her mother and grandmother to a life of martyrdom, she rejects La Virgen de Guadalupe; in fact, she forcefully had to push the furniture against the door and not let [her] in” (126). Chayo not only shuts out La Virgen, she shuts herself off from the rest of her family. And they do not understand why she distances herself from them: “It’s not so good to spend so much time alone. What she do in there all by herself? It don’t look right” (126). As a result, Chayo feels as socially, physically, and culturally placeless as Clemencia and Connie.

In order for Chayo and the other female characters to break free from cultural limitations, they must appropriate damaging spaces and objects into redeeming tokens of femininity. One way that the women are able to express themselves and resist patriarchy is through the process of altar making. Altar making allows the women to reclaim a space of their own, and gives them a place to physically release the grief they have in their lives. Chayo’s placelessness in her own home leads her to a community church where she discovers an altar to La Virgen de Guadalupe. At the altar, she discovers a place of her own where she is free to examine her conflicted life. As Chayo closely examines the altar, she reads the notes, cards, and mementos dedicated to La Virgen and discovers that she is not alone. Chayo realizes that these tokens and trinkets are no longer inanimate objects, but they are “so many petitions, so many promises made and kept” (125). As Chayo reads these letters, she understands that her prayer to La Virgen connects her to a

larger cultural community and she is no longer alone in her quest for understanding and acceptance.

Similarly, in *Paradise*, altar making plays an essential part in the women's rise to transcendence. By physically and orally expressing their pain, the women of the Convent are able to move beyond their traumatic experiences and heal. The women convert the cellar into a sacred space, a shrine devoted to themselves and their spiritual mother Consolata. This space is central to their healing: "in the beginning the most important thing was the template. First they had to scrub the cellar floor until its stones were as clean as rocks on a shore. Then they ringed the place with candles" (Morrison 263). Soon, the cellar is reminiscent of the altar in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises." The women fill the space with objects that symbolize their past and present experiences, dreams and yearnings. The offerings left in the cellar mirror those of the shrine and instead of "a gold sacred heart, a tiny copper arm, a kneeling man in silver, a bottle, a brass truck [...]," the women leave "yellow barrettes, red peonies, a green cross on a field of white. A majestic Penis pierced with Cupid's bow. Rose of Sharon petals, Lorna Doones [. . .]" (Cisneros 125; Morrison 265). These objects take on a subversive quality as "prior to establishment of the church, spirituality is embodied through shrines, places in the slave's cave-like hut that are private and secret: the white master could not even understand how the rocks and pieces of herb mounted constituted an altar, a place of power in the life of the powerless" (*homegrown* 121). In the novel, Morrison uses gender as synonymous with race, and so the townsmen, like the white masters, "could not even understand" how these places were "a place of power." Instead, the men look at the altars

and find them demonic, referring to the cellar and its altars, as the “devil’s bedroom, bathroom, and his nasty playpen” (17).

The men are blind to the meaning and significance of the objects the women placed on their altars, as they are unable to understand “the strange things nailed or taped to the walls or propped in the corner. A 1968 calendar, large X’s marking various dates (April 4, July 19); a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered; an astrology chart; a fedora tilted on the plastic neck of a female torso [...]” (7). The men view these objects as signs of heresy. The men wonder “what [...] could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit, and sly torture of children?” (8). It is incomprehensible for the men to understand that these objects could have a profound significance.

In “Never Marry a Mexican” Clemencia does not technically create an altar, but she does discover a way to retaliate against Drew by reclaiming her individual space out of his white domain. After experiencing the overt whiteness in Drew’s house, Clemencia realizes that in order to emancipate herself from his clutches, she must reclaim her culture and color. When standing in his bedroom amidst the Eurocentric objects, she takes her first step in de-colonizing herself by physically inserting symbols of herself throughout the room. She leaves brightly colored gummy bears throughout the room, carefully placing them in particular spots where only Drew’s wife would discover them:

I went around the house and left a trail of them in places I was sure she would find them. One her Lucite makeup organizer. One stuffed inside each bottle of nail polish. I untwisted the expensive lipsticks to their full

length and smushed a bear on the top before recapping them. I even put a gummy bear in her diaphragm case in the very center of that luminescent rubber moon. (81)

With this act, she taints the overt whiteness, and she no longer feels as though she is in occupied territory. She knows that her trail of brightly colored gummy bears is symbolic of her color, acknowledging that “[Drew] could say it was the cleaning woman’s Mexican voodoo” and blame it upon the work of a colored woman (81). By placing bright gummy bears strategically around the room, she inserts a piece of herself into the white world that Drew prevents her from truly entering and takes her first step in reclaiming space and power.

In *homegrown*, bell hooks and Amalia Mesa-Bains discuss the importance of altar making for Mexican and African American culture: “as with Mexican American women, shrine making offers a spiritual and creative practice to African Americans that is beyond the confines of patriarchy” (Mesa-Bains 120). Mesa-Bains, a Chicana activist and artist has found that “most people don’t recognize that the home altar is a counterpart to church patriarchy, because home altars are presided over by a female figure in the family, like my grandmother and my mother. The church has its patriarchy of priests, but families often have a matriarchal spirituality” (118). In this sense, the altars constructed in “Little Miracles” and *Paradise* are deeply subversive because they not only honor a female goddess, but they are also constructed and tended to by women, rather than men.

Like Mesa-Bains, hooks describes the altar’s importance in African American culture: “like Mexican Americans, Black folks in the South often constructed altars, in

spite of patriarchal Christianity's influence, which discouraged people from having altars in their homes" (120). She finds that "the altar was the place you could bring your burdens, lay them down, and be restored" (120). The altars are also subversive because they are syncretic as there "are always signs of the natural, signs of the indigenous within those altars. They serve as a sacred space, and as a place where women have power" (120).

Just as both Mesa-Bains and hooks discover a shared bond over the importance of altar making and describe it as a spiritual place of power, Clemencia, Chayo, and Consolata utilize altar making to fight against the patriarchal structure. Both Morrison and Cisneros stress the necessity for women to actively participate in writing, drawing, and speaking as acts of resistance, and through the sacred space of the altar, or the shrine, the women at the Convent are able to perform all three.

An additional act of resistance and offering that Chayo and the Convent women share is the cutting of their hair. With this act, the women convert their bodies into physical altars. Writing to La Virgen and offering her braid of hair allow Chayo to escape from the weight of the oppressive forces of *Marianismo*, as "something shed like snakeskin" and her "head [became] as light as if I'd raised it from water (Cisneros 125). Similarly, the women of the Convent discover freedom as they shave their heads and physically release their tormented pain from their bodies. Shaving their heads allows the women to demonstrate control of their bodies and to proudly display their newly changed selves. Their bodies become a living template, a medium for change. With Consolata in charge, "feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered"

(265). They have physically and emotionally altar[ed], caring for their bodies with the respect that one dedicates to a shrine or altar.

In all three texts, space and place play an integral part in their discovery of the mother goddess and spiritual enlightenment. In *homegrown*, hooks and Chicana artist Mesa-Bains discuss the centrality of creating safe and uplifting spaces that exist outside of patriarchal masculinity. Both agree that for African American and Mexican American women, “home is a site where oppressed and disenfranchised people restore their spirits, and continue the process of self-recovery” (98). Thus, for Clemencia, Consolata, and Chayo, creating a “home” amidst the forces of patriarchy and colonialism is essential for their discovery of the mother goddess.

## CHAPTER IV

### DECOLONIZING THE GODDESSES OF *WOMAN HOLLERING CREEK* AND *PARADISE*

When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself.

--Toni Morrison, "Rootedness"

In hooks and Mesa-Bains's dialogue *homegrown*, the authors come together as women of color to express the similarities between African American and Mexican American culture. In their chapter entitled "Family," the women discuss the role that Christianity has had in their lives. [H]ooks recalls, "My earliest childhood experiences were shaped by fundamentalist Christian beliefs. As much as anything else, they framed what girls could or could not do (5). After compiling a list of actions the church forbids her to do—"girls couldn't wear pants, we couldn't play music, and we couldn't walk across the pulpit"—she refers to her experience growing up in the church as "an early indoctrination into sexist thinking" (5). Mesa-Bains describes her experience with the Catholic Church in a similar way, stating that, "Catholicism belonged to the altar boys" (5).

[H]ooks and Mesa-Bains's dialogue on Christianity and their personal experiences with this male-dominated religion parallel those that Cisneros and Morrison discuss in their texts. Critiquing Christianity for "repressing female sexuality, overlooking male violence, and reinforcing the ethic of suffering-as-virtue," the authors emphasize that in order for women to emancipate themselves from the clutches of patriarchy, they must incorporate female-centered spirituality within religion (Groover 191). As a way to combat Christianity's patriarchal practices, the authors decolonize traditional religious and cultural icons by recasting La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Malinche into feminist icons that "reflect [...] a religious vision in which [they] are not the subjects, but the agents of religious practice" and power (Groover 191).

While in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" Chayo may have discovered the power of a healing space when she encounters the altar to La Virgen de Guadalupe, she refuses to identify and worship La Virgen until she recasts her into an Aztec goddess: "I don't know how it all fell in place. How I finally understood who you are. No longer Mary the mild, but our mother Tonantzín. Your church at Tepayac built on the site of her temple. Sacred ground no matter whose goddess claims it" (128). By briefly describing the legend, Cisneros recognizes La Virgen as a syncretic embodiment of indigenous spirituality and Catholicism. Once Chayo is aware of the legend of La Virgen, she is able to honor and celebrate her:

When I learned your real name is Coatlxopeuh, She who has Dominion over Serpents, when I recognized you as Tonantzin, and learned your names are Teoteoinnnan, Toci, Xochiquetzal, Tlazoltetol, Coatlicue, Chalchiuhtlicue, Huixtocihuatl, Chemicomecoatl [...] I wasn't ashamed

then, then, to be my mother's daughter, my grandmother's granddaughter,  
my ancestor's child. (128)

As an Aztec goddess, Guadalupe has the ability to transcend Catholicism and become a mobilizing figure in Chayo's life. Rather than feeling shame when she recalls her grandmother's devotion to La Virgen, she now understands the magnitude of her power and experiences pride: "That you could have the power to rally a people when a country was born, and again during a civil war, and during a farm workers' strike in California made me think maybe there is power in my mother's patience, strength in my grandmother's endurance" (128). Recognizing Guadalupe's power enables Chayo to appreciate her culture and finally love herself. She no longer looks down upon her mother and grandmother, but rather views their life of servitude as a manifestation of Guadalupe's enduring power. Separating La Virgen from the constraints of family and the Catholic Church allows Chayo to redefine the icon into a figure that celebrates her life choices and artistic desires.

Cisneros's reconstruction of La Virgen connects Chayo not only to her mother and grandmother, but also to a broader cultural audience that encompasses all religions and ethnicities. Besides redefining Guadalupe as an Aztec goddess, Cisneros links her to the deities of the world to emphasize her place as a feminine face of God: "When I could see you in all your facets, all at once the Buddha, the Tao, the true Messiah, Yahweh, Allah the Heart of the Sky, the Heart of the Earth, the Lord of the Near and Far, the Spirit, the Light, the Universe, I could love you, and, finally, learn to love me" (128).

Cisneros's decision to link La Virgen to the other deities challenges Paz's belief that La Virgen is below the other "great goddesses" (Paz 10). In "Sons of La Malinche" Paz demeans La Virgen by disassociating her from other goddesses; however, Cisneros challenges him by linking La Virgen to female goddesses and male gods. By describing La Virgen as an extension of all worldly divinities she illustrates Guadalupe pertains to not only Mexican culture, but also La Virgen is a goddess who is capable of unifying all cultures and religions. Whether La Virgen is called Guadalupe or Tonantzin, she is a feminist icon with the ability to unite and empower all women of color.

Whereas in "Little Miracles, Broken Promises," Cisneros describes one individual's discovery of faith and culture; in *Paradise* Morrison describes the danger that occurs when an entire community forsakes culture and ancestry. The town of Ruby effectively denies its African American and African culture by maintaining a Eurocentric worldview. The townspeople epitomize the virtues of Western culture, and as a whole "embrace rationalism, skepticism, materialism and competitiveness as its highest virtues" (Prahlad 570). The town's roots are shallowly based upon the community's forefathers', and thus they are disconnected and aloof from the African American community at large. The majority of the town's inhabitants, specifically the older generation, want to deny their African ancestry. For citizens such as Soane, "All [she] knew about Africa was the seventy-five cents she gave to the missionary society collection. She had the same level of interest in Africans as they had in her: none. But Roy talked about them like they were neighbors, or worse, family" (104). Even the town's historian and teacher Patricia Best remains disconnected from her past to the African Diaspora: "slavery is our past. Nothing can change that, certainly not Africa" (210). As an educator and historian, she is the

bearer of culture, and recorder of history; yet, she fails to incorporate their ancestry into her teachings and genealogy. The community makes “a sharp division between the material and the spiritual world, privileging the material,” which in turn creates a sharp rift with the Convent and the Convent women (Wilentz 69).

Within the entire town of Ruby, there is only one person who embraces an afrocentric perspective—old and eccentric Lone Dupres. Because of her different worldview she, like Billie Delia, is marginalized within the town and finds friendship with the Convent women. Lone, in fact, is the one who recognizes the power in Consolata and teaches her how to use her gift of “insight” (247).

One afternoon while Consolata is gardening, Lone visits Consolata and speaks to her of “information that made her uneasy” (245). “Let your mind grow long and use what God gives you” (246). The teachings and practices that Lone teaches Consolata are very similar to the Mexican American “curing worldview and healing practice” called *curanderismo*. (Rebelledo 120). Lone and Connie exhibit the qualities of *curanderas* as they employ elements of the Earth and perform “ancient healing techniques” and “supernatural theories of folk magic” to heal those around them (Leal 560). Soon Connie has mastered the art of mixing herbs and roots to alleviate everyday symptoms and has even learned to give life back to the dead.

At first, Connie tries to ignore her powers, “complain[ing] that she did not believe in magic; that the church and everything holy forbade its claim to knowingness and its practice” (244). In order for Connie to reclaim her rightful place as Consolata Sosa, she must relinquish aspects of the Catholic Church and embrace her supernatural abilities.

Morrison emphasizes the importance of one's ancestry as she illustrates that Connie's transformation to Consolata is contingent upon the acceptance of her ancestry. For Connie, learning how to utilize her "gift" and the fruits of the earth allow her to begin decolonizing herself and find Piedade. By integrating pagan-like rituals into her Catholic upbringing, she becomes a living and breathing version of Chayo's Guadalupe.

Although Connie begins to exercise her powers by learning how to use her gift of insight, she has yet to fully become a mother/goddess. Connie still clings to her old way of life by spending her days and nights in a drunken stupor over the loss of her lover and mother. Because of Connie's inability to fully love and take care of herself, she is unable to be an adequate mother to the convent women. While over the years Connie has provided the women with food, shelter, and friendship, she lacks the ability to heal and unify the women. Like the traditional Guadalupe that Cisneros criticizes in "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," Connie offers solace, yet no solution, allowing the women to live in "foolish babygirl wishes" and "babygirl dreams" (Morrison 222). The women's pathetic cries to Connie parallel the sad murmurings of Chayo's mother and grandmother. As Chayo's *abuela* mumbles, "my son, my son, my son..." the young women in the Convent "spoke of men who once had desperately loved them; or men who should have loved them, might have loved, would have" (Cisneros 127; Morrison 222). Connie is an indulgent and ineffective mother, and hence the women view her as "this granny goose who could be confided in or ignored, lied to or suborned; this play mother who could be hugged or walked out on depending on the whim of the child" (Morrison 262).

In order for the women to rise above their pain and suffering, a strong maternal presence is necessary. Just as Chayo is unable to worship La Virgen until she alters

herself from “Mary the mild” to “our mother Tonantzín,” Connie is powerless until she rejects the White-European name her colonizers assigned to her and renames herself “Consolata Sosa” (Cisneros 128, Morrison 262). Rejecting her Americanized name “Connie,” she decolonizes herself by reclaiming her Brazilian culture and asserting herself as a woman of color.

Under this name, Consolata redefines her place in the lives of the Convent women. Assuming the role of a mother, she begins by giving the women much-needed guidance and instruction: “If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for” (Morrison 262). Consolata gives the Convent women much more than a prescribed set of house rules; she instructs the women of her ancestral ties to Brazil:

She spoke of fruit that tasted the way sapphires look and boys using rubies for dice. Of scented cathedrals made of gold where gods and goddesses sat in the pews with the congregation. Of carnations tall as trees. Dwarfs with diamonds for teeth. Snakes roused by poetry and bells. Then she told them of a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word. (263-64)

As Consolata speaks to the women of her cultural and spiritual homeland, she replaces her adoration of Mary Magna with her true mother Piedade. By aligning herself to Piedade, she infuses aspects of her Brazilian culture into Catholicism and reiterates the importance of a female icon that is reflective of a woman’s ancestral ties. Her teachings are a synthesis of Catholicism and the mysticism of her homeland, paralleling Cisneros’s reconfiguration of Guadalupe.

Both Consolata and Chayo must infuse their spirituality with their indigenous Latin American ancestry in order to fully embrace themselves and Guadalupe/Piedade. As Chayo views Guadalupe “bare-breasted, snakes in [her hand]” and “swallowing raw hearts and volcanic ash,” Consolata speaks of “snakes roused by poetry and bells” and a woman “who sang but never said a word” (Cisneros 127; Morrison 264). Both Morrison and Cisneros utilize snake imagery in their portrayal of the mother/goddess to depict her true and ancient properties. Chayo’s desire for Guadalupe to hold snakes makes reference to the Aztec goddess “Coatlicue” (Anzaldúa 49). Coatlicue was the creator goddess and “descended from or is an aspect of earlier Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses” (49). Coatlicue is known for having “had a human skull or serpent for head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet” (49). After the conquest, Anzaldúa believes that the Catholic Church decided “to split *Tonantsi/Guadalupe*. They de-sexed *Guadalupe* taking *Coatlalopeuh*, the serpent sexuality, out of her” (Anzaldúa 49). The snake alludes to Guadalupe’s Aztec origin as well as a “kind of heterodox knowledge and sexuality that Christianity has spurned” (Warner 269). While the Catholic Church views the snake as a “loathsome symbol of wickedness,” there are numerous representations of the Virgin Mary stepping on a snake (269). This could be simply viewed as the Virgin’s “purity and wisdom” prevailing over the wickedness of the snake, or it could in fact be linking her to “heterodox knowledge and sexuality” (269). Applying this interpretation to Morrison and Cisneros’ snake-imagery glorifies La Virgen as a knowledgeable and sexual woman.

Now that Connie has transformed herself into Consolata and has told the story of Piedade, she has the necessary power and tools to teach the women how to love

themselves and each other. As part of Consolata's teachings, she teaches the women how to create altars and "loud dream." After purging their minds and bodies through "loud-dreaming" in the cellar, the women dance freely in the rain, experiencing a moment of rebirth. Seeing the rain, "they gathered in the kitchen door, first they watched, then they stuck out their hands to feel. It was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces" (Morrison 283). The women christen themselves in the rain, becoming as pure as innocent children who receive the first sacrament. As the water falls on their shaved heads, they become "holy women dancing in hot sweet rain" (283). As the newly proclaimed mother-goddess, Consolata is "the more furious dancer" (283). In this image, Morrison carefully intertwines religious imagery with indigenous religious practices. After performing this last cathartic act, the women are healed. As they dance together in the rain, they celebrate their discovery of self-love and sisterhood.

At the closing of the novel, Morrison ends with one last image of Consolata and Piedade. Once again, Morrison makes reference to Catholicism as she portrays a representation of the divine Mother and blessed Child. However, Morrison inverts this Christian image by replacing Christ with Consolata, portraying mother and daughter, rather than mother and son: "In ocean hush a women black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman's lap. Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair. All the colors of seashells—wheat, roses, pearl—fuse the younger woman's face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue" (318).

Like Cisneros's decision to equate La Virgen to male deities such as the Buddha and the Messiah, this image of Consolata is synonymous to Christ. Replacing the Christ with Consolata signals the feminization of Catholicism and thereby asserts the power of Piedade's matriarchal lineage. Morrison's depiction of the Madonna and child also alludes to the paintings and statues of the black Madonna in Europe. As Morrison describes Piedade as "black as firewood" with "ruined hands," she personifies France's wooden statue of the black Virgin of Rocamadour (Boyer 36). Viewing Piedade as a representation of the black Madonna necessitates returning her to her rightful place in African American religious traditions as well as in Catholicism.

Morrison also illustrates the cross-cultural power of this icon by portraying the mother and daughter in differing skin tones. While Piedade is "black as firewood," Consolata is light-skinned, a mixture of "wheat, roses [and] pearl" (318). Despite their differing skin colors, Consolata and Piedade are the Divine Mother and child, forever united in a holy embrace. In this image, Morrison completely reconfigures the patriarchal trinity of Catholicism by altering it to represent matriarchy. Besides combating the patriarchal notions associated with Catholicism, she provides an image that connects and celebrates all races. Morrison's portrayal of Consolata and Piedade emphasizes that in order for a mother/goddess to effectively empower women, she must transcend the divisions of race and color. Like Cisneros's portrayal of Guadalupe, Morrison's reconfiguration of the Virgin personifies the idea that a feminist icon must be a realistic figure that women can identify and recognize within themselves.

While Piedade holds Consolata, she sings of "reaching age in the company of the other, of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss

of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun” (Morrison 318). Peidade’s song of home, community, and dialogue is reminiscent of Toni Cade Bambara’s vision of Third World feminism in the Foreword of *This Bridge Called My Back*. Bambara’s vision entails women of all colors and cultures as she describes a cross-cultural image of motherhood, where women can come together and create “a habit of listening to each other and learning each other’s ways of seeing and being” (vii). She envisions women coming together “as we heard each other [...] before the breaking of the land mass when we mothers of the yam, of the rice, of the maize, of the plantain sat together in a circle, staring into the camp fire, the answers in our laps, knowing how to focus [...]” (viii). Morrison and Bambara’s visions of community stress that through dialogue, through “speech shared,” women have the ability to transcend their cultural differences through the basic commonalities of food, home, love, and mothering. It is in this sacred circle around the fire, or the modern-day kitchen table, where women can come together and find shared meaning in one another’s lives. Morrison’s closing image of Piedade and Consolata is one of redeeming hope. While Consolata and Piedade have profoundly changed the lives of Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas, there are women continuing to suffer from abuse and oppression, and they have thus only just begun the “endless work they were created to do down here in paradise” (318).

Whereas in “Little Miracles” and *Paradise*, the process of decolonization leads Chayo and Clemencia to an alternate mother figure, in “Never Marry a Mexican,” Clemencia’s transformation enables her to discover the mother/goddess within herself. Throughout the story, Cisneros creates a clever reconfiguration of not only La Malinche but also of La Virgen de Guadalupe. At first, her surface portrayal of Clemencia

resembles Paz's Malinche. Cisneros capitalizes on Paz's assertion that La Malinche possesses "perverse" sexuality by writing Clemencia as a sexual predator who seduces her lover's son as revenge. By portraying Clemencia as an adulteress, it may appear as though Cisneros is only feeding into a negative representation of La Malinche. In recent criticisms, writers such as Alexandra Fitts have disapproved of Cisneros' portrayal of Clemencia, claiming that her character is "not so terribly far from the La Malinche described by Paz" (21). Fitts criticizes Clemencia's sexuality and finds that she is "still an overtly sexualized figure who trades her body for power" (21). She condemns Clemencia, asserting that "ultimately, she is still a traitor" and that Cisneros fails at reconciling La Malinche (21).

Although Fitts criticizes Clemencia, I find that Clemencia exercises decisive power and authority through her sexuality. Applying Cisneros's personal essay "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" to "Never Marry a Mexican" elevates Clemencia's status from a jilted mistress to an enlightened sexual diva. In Cisneros' poignant and heartfelt critique of La Virgen in "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" she discovers her ancient predecessors:

In my research of Guadalupe's pre-Columbian antecedents, the she before the Church desexed her, I found Tonantzin, and inside Tonantzin a pantheon of other mother goddesses. I discovered Tlazolteotl, the goddess of fertility and sex, also referred to as Totzin, Our Beginnings, or Tzinteotl, goddess of the rump. *Putas*, nymphs, and other loose women were known as "women of the sex goddess." (49)

Viewing Clemencia as an extension of these Aztec goddesses alters how we can regard her sexuality. Rather than viewing her rampant sexuality and adultery as examples of her treacherous ties to La Malinche, it reflects her alliance to ancient Aztec goddesses.

Unlike Chayo or the Convent women who discover self-love and enlightenment from an external mother/goddess, Clemencia discovers the goddess within herself. By reclaiming her own body and de-colonizing herself she not only represents a reconfiguration of La Malinche and La Virgen, but she embodies the qualities of the ancient Aztec goddesses.

Furthermore, Clemencia's extreme behavior can further attributed to her newfound role as a destructive goddess. Cisneros illustrates this idea further in "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess":

To me *la Virgen de Guadalupe* is also Coatlicue, the creative/destructive goddess. When I think of the Coatlicue statue in the National Museum in Mexico City, so terrible it was unearthed and then reburied because it was too frightening to look at, I think of a woman enraged, a woman as tempest, a woman *bien berrinchuda*, and I like that. *La Lupe as cabrona*.  
(49-50)

Cisneros's essay deconstructs the idea that a woman must be passive and self-effacing by describing a woman's expression of anger as an elevating attribute and an indicator of her tie to Aztec ancestry. Rather than lamenting over her lost love as Connie, the Convent women, and Chayo's grandmother do, Clemencia acts upon her anguish and initiates change. Therefore, regarding Clemencia as a "woman enraged" demonstrates alliance to goddesses such as Coatlicue.

In “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” Cisneros also discusses how she had to reconstruct La Virgen to encompass her own identity:

Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl, Tonantzin, *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. They are each telescoped one into the other, into who I am. And this is where *la Lupe* intrigues me—not the Lupe of 1531 who appeared to Juan Diego, but the one of the 1990s who has shaped who we are as Chicanas/*mexicanas* today, the one inside each Chicana and *mexicana*. Perhaps it’s the Tlazolteotl-Lupe in me whose *malcriada* spirit inspires me to leap into the swimming pool naked or dance on a table with my skirt on my head. Maybe it’s my Coatlicue-Lupe attitude that makes it possible for my mother to tell me, *No wonder men can’t stand you.* (50)

Examining Clemencia the way Cisneros looks at herself in “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” suggests that her atrocious acts are much more than revenge, but rather a way for her to unleash her power. Each outrageous action she performs is indicative of the type of goddess she is channeling. Even Clemencia’s relationship with Drew’s son can be read as an indicator of her inherent ancestral attributes. Her combination of motherhood and sexuality once again reflects her ties to the indigenous Mexican goddesses and la Virgen de Guadalupe. Clemencia’s ability to merge the maternal and the sexual is reminiscent of her ancient predecessors. In “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess” Cisneros discovers that the Aztec goddesses, Tonantzin, Tlazolteotl, and Tzintzeotl were actually dual figures of sexuality and fertility (49). She discovered that “Tlazolteotl was the patron of sexual passion, and though she had the power to stir you to sin, she could also forgive you and cleanse you of your sexual transgressions...” (49). To Cisneros,

“Tlazolteotl, then is a duality of maternity *and* sexuality. In other words, she is a sexy mama” (49).

Clemencia also discovers a divine-like power. Clemencia’s power over Drew’s son is disturbing yet awe-inspiring: “I can tell from the way he looks at me, I have him in my power. Come, sparrow. I have the patience of eternity. Come to *mamita*. My stupid little bird. I don’t move. I don’t startle him. I let him nibble. All, all for you. Rub his belly. Stroke him. Before I snap my teeth” (82). As Clemencia exerts complete and total dominance over Drew’s son, she also reverses gender roles. Clemencia is now the colonizer, as her age, sexuality, and power give her the ability to manipulate and mold Drew’s young son. In this relationship, she physically, mentally, and emotionally is in control as she is able “to make the boy love me the way I love his father. To make him want me, hunger, twist in his sleep, as if he’d swallowed glass” (82).

Clemencia’s version of motherhood not only recasts gender roles; she also discovers a way to reconcile the memory of her mother and reconfigure the role of the mother. In *The Reproduction of Mothering* Chodorow discusses how “motherhood may be a (fantasied) attempt to make reparation to a mother’s own mother [...] it may be a way to get back at her mother for (fantasied) injuries done by her mother to her” (90). Mothering Drew’s son allows Clemencia “to make reparation” with her mother. Through her relationship with Drew’s son, she recreates her mother’s abandonment. However, Clemencia reverses the race and sex of the scenario--as Clemencia’s mother leaves her family for a white man, Drew’s son leaves his white family for a Mexican woman. By altering the race and sex of the situation, Clemencia attempts to disprove

her mother's theory that it is socially and culturally inappropriate for Anglos and Mexicans to interact romantically.

Besides working through her issues with her mother, she completely alters the role of the mother by infusing it with sexuality. Her mother inadvertently taught her daughter to use her sexuality, and so it is not surprising that she relies upon it in her own version of mothering. Clemencia mothers Drew's son by attending to his physical, emotional, and sexual needs. Despite performing this ultimate revenge against her former lover, there is a tender motherly side to Clemencia. Looking at Drew's son, Clemencia imagines that he is her own, proclaiming, "You could be my son if you weren't so light-skinned" (76). Like a mother, she cares for him, feeding him, driving him, and listening to his youthful wishes of becoming a rocker. In the mornings Clemencia "fixe[s] coffee for [herself], milk for the boy, ironically understanding that he is too young for coffee, but not for sex (82). She treats him all at once like a small child, and a lover. She "puts him in her mouth. Here, little piece of my *corazón*. And tells him, "Come here, *mi cariñito*. Come to *mamita*. Here's a bit of toast" (82). Becoming "a duality of "maternity *and* sexuality" not only illustrates her ties to Aztec sex goddesses, it reconfigures motherhood as it refutes the mother/whore dichotomy. Intertwining sexuality with motherhood creates a mothering figure that is identifiable and redeeming to Clemencia and all women as it allows them to embrace all aspects of womanhood.

The acts of destruction that Clemencia executes throughout "Never Marry a Mexican" are much more than revenge, but rather a carefully honed craft that reflects her newfound identity as a goddess. Clemencia often wonders what gives her physical

capabilities of performing such vindictive behavior, and I find it is her connection to the divine. She asks herself at night, “What is it inside me that makes me so crazy at 2 a.m.? I can’t blame it on the alcohol in my blood when there isn’t any. It’s something worse. Something that poisons the blood and tips me when the night swells and I feel as if the whole sky were leaning against my brain” (82-3). Clemencia realizes that the blood coursing through her veins is unique, and powerful. She immediately wants to blame this unique sensation on alcohol; yet, she has not consumed any. Instead, this powerful feeling is an inherently divine attribute. Like Consolata, who utilizes the earth’s natural elements to give her healing powers, Clemencia relies upon its natural forces, for “when the night swells,” Clemencia feels as though she has control over the “whole sky” (83). She is so in tune to earth’s natural elements, she knows that “when the gravity of the planets is just right, it all tilts and upsets the visible balance. And that’s when it wants to out from my eyes” (83).

As a goddess, Clemencia is well aware that she is capable of killing herself and others. Yet, in the end, she does not want to harm; she wants to love and nurture: “Human beings pass me on the street, and I want to reach out and strum them as if they were guitars. Sometimes all humanity strikes me as lovely. I just want to reach out and stroke someone, and say There, there, it’s all right, honey. There, there, there” (83). Cisneros’s conclusion leaves us with an image of an eternal mother. Clemencia’s desire to mother the human beings she passes on the street refutes the notion that she as La Malinche has abandoned her children. She does not want to destroy; she wants to play with humanity, to paint them, to create them. She becomes all at once destructive yet nurturing, maternal yet sexual. As an artist, mother, and goddess she has the ability to create, to comfort, and

to destroy. Clemencia emancipates herself from Drew's Malinalli and into a powerful creative/destructive goddess.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: SISTERS OF THE YAM AND MAIZE LEARN TO DIALOGUE

We are connected.

--Amalia Mesa-Bains, *homegrown*.

In the Afterword of *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow emphasizes the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in a woman's life because each woman has a "powerful need for her own mother," however "conflictual," "ambivalent" or gratifying the relationship (212). Chodorow also voices the significance of a supportive female community to aid in the success of the relationship and the growth of the daughter: "Mother-daughter relationships in which the mother is supported by a network of women kin and friends, and has meaningful work and self-esteem, produce daughters with capacities for nurturance and a strong sense of self" (213). Cisneros and Morrison beautifully exemplify Chodorow's theories on mothering by illustrating how a woman's discovery of a mother figure and female companionship lead to self-actualization and emancipation. Throughout the texts, the authors reveal the dangers of ineffective

mothering for women of color and show the dire need for mothers, biological or spiritual, to empower and uplift these women.

The texts not only provide modern feminist icons to fulfill the “powerful need for [a woman’s] own mother”; Morrison and Cisneros also promote the importance of a cross-cultural “network of women kin and friends” by incorporating the beliefs of Third World feminism in their writing. For example, in the conclusion of *homegrown*, hooks writes, “*homegrown* documents the ability of a Chicana and an African American woman to meet one another, speak through our differences, and find our communalities” (145). In their work, the authors effectively depict the shared struggles of women, while answering the pleas of Third World feminism by offering an uplifting icon to aid in the “endless work” of combating oppression, racism, and sexism. Cisneros and Morrison also advocate the development of strong feminist icons that mobilize women and call for collective action. As Clemencia, Chayo, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas discover the healing powers of brown and black goddesses, Cisneros and Morrison reveal the power that lies in cross-cultural feminist iconography.

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## VITA

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This thesis was typed by Rebecca G. Flores.

Feminist literary criticism is literary criticism informed by feminist theory, or more broadly, by the politics of feminism. It uses the principles and ideology of feminism to critique the language of literature. This school of thought seeks to analyze and describe the ways in which literature portrays the narrative of male domination by exploring the economic, social, political, and psychological forces embedded within literature. This way of thinking and criticizing works can be said to have changed