

**“One foot in this world and one foot in that”:  
*Woman Hollering Creek* and the  
bildungscomposite**

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## Samandrag

*Woman Hollering Creek* av Sandra Cisneros er ei bok som har vore vanskeleg å plassere i ein sjanger. Den har blitt kalla ein “tekst” og ei novellesamling, og fleire av tekstane i boka har blitt diskutert og analysert individuelt utan at resten av boka har blitt nemnt. I denne oppgåva vil eg diskutere *Woman Hollering* som det eg kallar ein “bildungscomposite,” det vil seie ein sjanger som kan seiast å vere ein hybrid av *Bildungsroman* og short story composite. I samsvar med composite-sjangeren er dei 22 tekstane i boka sjølvstendige og fullstendige tekstar som kan lesast kvar for seg, samtidig som det finst forbindelsar mellom dei einskilde tekstane som gjer at vi kan lese boka som ein heilskap. Boka er inndelt i tre delar som tydeleg representerar barndom, ungdom og vaksenliv, og dette tilseier at oppbygginga av boka er fastsett av *Bildung*.

Eg vil hevde at å lese *Woman Hollering* som ein bildungscomposite vil gi ei meir heilskaplig forståing av boka fordi strukturen i ein composite gjer det mogleg å sjå samanhengar på tvers av inndelinga av boka. Eg konkluderar med at denne hybridsjangeren er eit resultat av litterær “transkulturasjon,” eller transculturation, og at dette er ein sjanger som er godt egna til å skildre mangfaldige og heterogene samfunn som, for eksempel, Chicanos/as.



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## Preface

When Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* was first published in 1991, it was under the name *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. The words "and other stories" in a title, according to both Susan Garland Mann and Hans H. Skei, usually signify a collection of individual stories that have no connection to one another. However, in the later editions of *Woman Hollering*, those three words have been removed from the title. Whether this adjustment was a conscious decision made in order to dissociate the book from the genre of short story collections we do not know. The book is difficult to categorise, and critics do not seem sure of how to label *Woman Hollering*; it has been called a "text" and a short story collection, and individual texts have been excerpted from the book and discussed in isolation. However, I believe that *Woman Hollering* is more than merely a *collection* of stories, and that the texts are connected in a way that offers the reader a fuller understanding of the book than if the stories were to be read separately and isolated from the rest of the book. Drawing on theory on the *Bildungsroman* and the short story composite, I will argue that the complexity of *Woman Hollering*'s generic province can be resolved if we read it as what I will here refer to as a "bildungscomposite."

In chapter one I will give a short survey of the few scholarly works I have found on *Woman Hollering*, and how the critics understand the genre of the book. I will then give an outline of the genres *Bildungsroman* and short story composite. Chapter two will focus on the concept and theories of core and satellite stories, followed by analyses of the central stories of the book (seven core stories and three satellite stories). In chapter three I will offer a discussion of the three trajectories that the strings of core stories offer: individual identity, collective identity, and rite of passage. As my discussion will hopefully show, this generic hybrid, the

bildungscomposite, is the outcome of literary transculturation, and this is the main focus of the concluding part of the thesis.

## CHAPTER I

In this chapter I will first summarise the few scholarly works I have found that discuss *Woman Hollering*, or parts of it, and the critics' take on the genre of the book. I will then give an outline of the short story composite genre, and the development of the *Bildungsroman* from the traditional German *Bildungsroman* to the newer, revised versions of the genre, such as the female *Bildungsroman* and the Chicano/a *Bildungsroman*.

### ***Woman Hollering Creek and the question of genre***

*Woman Hollering* is a short book of 165 pages. It consists of 22 stories, or texts, varying in length from one page to 29 pages. The book is divided into three sections: the first section, "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn," consists of seven stories; part two, "One Holy Night," has only two stories; and the third part, "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman," consists of 13 texts. The three parts represent three life stages: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and I will argue that this division suggests *Bildung* as the organising principle of the book.

In her essay "From Llorona to Gritona: Coatlicue in Feminist Tales by Viramontes and Cisneros," Ana María Carbonell isolates "Woman Hollering Creek" as a short story (71), and discusses it in relation to Helena María Viramontes's "The Cariboo Café" from *The Moths and Other Stories*, and Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "Coatlicue states" from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Similarly, Jacqueline Doyle extracts the same story with no mention of the book it was taken from. She analyses "Woman Hollering Creek" with focus on the figure of La Llorona and the revision of the myth, and also draws on Anzaldúa's notion of the New

Mestiza, a “new woman,” born out of the borderlands and transcending the traditional gender roles.

Mary P. Brady discusses several of the stories in relation to each other, the concept of *loiterature*, and the shaping of public memories, but she labels the book a *collection* of short stories. So does Maythee G.Rojas, although she is the only one to mention that the stories are divided into three parts, and she also sees that “Cisneros’s stories are linked in their attempt to trace the development of a Chicana/Mexicana feminist consciousness” (136). Brady and Rojas may be inclined to call the book a short story collection because they both work with editions with the title *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. The addition “*and Other Stories*” is, according to both Susan Garland Mann and Hans H. Skei, the sign of a short story *collection*, since such a title obviously makes no claim that the stories are connected. The later editions of *Woman Hollering*, however, do not have these three words in the title. Whether this is a conscious choice made in order to dissociate the book from the short story collection genre we do not know, but it does make it easier to claim that the stories are linked.

Jean Wyatt discusses “*Woman Hollering Creek*”, “*Never Marry a Mexican*” and “*Little Miracles*” in relation to each other, focusing on gender discourse, gender roles, and Mexican vs. Anglo discourse. She concludes that “Viewed from the perspective of the collection seen as a whole, the three stories can be seen as parts of a dialectical process of negotiating with cultural icons ...” (266).

In her article on translation and untranslatability in *Woman Hollering*, Harryette Mullen analyses “*Never Marry a Mexican*,” “*Woman Hollering Creek*,” and “*Bien Pretty*” primarily, and mentions several other stories. She discusses hidden and coded messages, and insider discourses that she finds in many of the stories in the

book. She suggests that the Spanish language's dual nature as "an insider code comprehensible to some but not to others" and its position as a repressed language in a country like the U.S. where English is the dominant language "might be read as the primary signification of the entire text" (4). However, she entirely avoids the question of genre and consistently refers to *Woman Hollering* as a "text."

Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, on the other hand, does discuss genre: "Cisneros has suggested her interest in innovation: 'I'm just not taken by the linear novel form. ... I'm much more interested in something new happening to literature.'<sup>1</sup> As a result, she turns to the short story" (Mermann-Jozwiak 108-9). She says that Cisneros experiments with the *short story* genre. And she is right – many of the stories in *Woman Hollering* are not conventional short stories. However, Cisneros has not only written individual stories, but narratives that are connected and must be seen in relation to each other if one wants to get a more comprehensive reading of the book. Mermann-Jozwiak isolates "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" from the rest and does not take into account the connectedness of the stories and the unity of the book as a whole.

A. Robert Lee is the only one among the critics I have found writing on *Woman Hollering* to suggest that the book is a short story composite,<sup>2</sup> when he calls it "a *Dubliners*-like *Latina* cycle of childhood, family, religion, and love affairs" (331). He only mentions it in passing, though, and does not elaborate on his classification. His comparing *Woman Hollering* to James Joyce's *Dubliners* may spring from the fact that both works have what Mann calls a composite protagonist: the stories may have different protagonists, but taken together they provide a general picture of e.g. a people, a class, or a generation. Mann also says that in *Dubliners* "there is an

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<sup>1</sup> Cisneros quoted in Mermann-Jozwiak.

<sup>2</sup> There are many different terms being used for this genre. For the course of this discussion I will be using *short story composite*.

archetypal Dubliner who moves from childhood to adulthood” (38). I think this is also true of *Woman Hollering* because the book is divided into three sections that represent childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and although the stories all have different protagonists, we get an overall sense of *Bildung* throughout the book. However, I would hesitate to use the word “archetypal,” as it implies that one character is representative of a large group, and I do not think that a people can be reduced to an “essence.” I will come back to the composite protagonist in *Woman Hollering* later in the discussion.

What several of these critics touch upon is the connectedness of the stories and the development, or gradual maturing, of the protagonists. Mullen and Wyatt both suggest a “primary signification” of the whole book. Lee’s comparison of the book to *Dubliners* implies *Bildung*, and so does Rojas’s statement about “the *development* of a Chicana/Mexicana feminist consciousness” (emphasis mine). However, I think we need to combine two genres for any of them to stick: the theme of *Bildung* links together stories that otherwise would not fit the description of a short story composite, but if we considered the book as merely a *collection* of short stories, we would not see the connection between the stories. It is this interdependence of the two genres that makes Cisneros’s text so interesting. The division of the book into the three sections – which clearly represent childhood, adolescence, and adulthood – suggests *Bildung* as the organising principle, and allows us to read the book in terms of a short story composite. This also means that we must look beyond the tripartite division of the *Bildung* process since the composite structure, as I will show, does not stay within these divides. Unlike other composites, *Woman Hollering* offers up three different overlapping strings or trajectories of *Bildung* in various manifestations, which further complicates the reading as these strings run across both each other and the tripartite

division. This is the main focus in chapter two; for the rest of this chapter I will set up the generic backdrop for a discussion of a hybrid genre made up of the *Bildungsroman* and the short story composite.

### ***Woman Hollering Creek and the short story composite***

There is general agreement among theorists that genres cannot be reduced to “a system, a set of rules, or immanent laws” (Børtnes 195). They are “subject to historical change and modification” (Børtnes 197), and every new text brings something to the genre. Skei even claims that a text does not necessarily have to be confined to one genre. In his analysis of Madison Jones’s *Season of the Strangler* he says that there are indications that the text is both a novel and a short story sequence (216). Skei concludes that

*Season of the Strangler* is a hybrid form, somewhere between the novel and the short story collection, but most of all a form that benefits from both genres. Hence, we might profit from a discussion of the so-called short story cycle, which I prefer to call short story sequence, which theorists situate somewhere between novel and story collection, and which might offer us better tools for our interpretive work with the text. (217)

There are several different terms being used for what Skei chooses to call a short story sequence. In his essay “The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book” Robert Luscher lists some of them: *rovelle* (a combination of the words *roman* and *novelle*), short story composite, short story compound, integrated short story collection, short story cycle, and Luscher’s preferred term, short story sequence. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris have suggested yet another label: composite novel. Different terms carry different connotations and emphasise different qualities of the genre; Luscher has problems with most of them. To him, *rovelle* “refers to the form’s dual impulses but

suggests the presence of a causal and temporal narrative dimension most sequences do not possess” (149). He probably would have included composite novel here if he had heard of it (*The Composite Novel* was published six years after Luscher’s 1989 article). In their book *The Composite Novel* Dunn and Morris propose the term composite novel and give a definition that could just as well be used for the short story composite. It seems to me, however, that they are a bit too eager to invent their own genre and have merely adopted and slightly altered definitions and examples of the short story composite. They themselves state that “*Winesburg, Ohio*”<sup>3</sup> (1919) is the book that most people will think of when they hear the term *short story cycle* or read our definition of the composite novel,” implying that the two terms are interchangeable (Dunn 52). They also give as examples of composite novels works that have been discussed as short story composites by a number of critics,<sup>4</sup> e.g. James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, and William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*. The creation of this “new genre” consequently seems superfluous and serves only to add yet another term to the already existing abundance of names.

The flaw of terms like composite, compound, and integrated short story collection, Luscher claims, is that they “fail to indicate the importance of the stories’ sequential nature or the recurrent elements that provide more dynamic unity” (149). The widely used short story cycle “deemphasiz[es] the volume’s successiveness,” which seems to be the most important aspect to Luscher. He chooses to use the term short story sequence because it “emphasize[s] the reader’s development of meaning” (149). Critics may have good arguments for their own preferred term, but in the end, it

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<sup>3</sup> by Sherwood Anderson.

<sup>4</sup> Prior to the publication of *The Composite Novel* in 1995 all of the following books, including *Winesburg, Ohio*, featured in Mann’s *The Short Story Cycle* (1989), and the works have been discussed as short story composites by Rolf Lundén, Sandra Lee Kleppe, and Forrest Ingram.



seems that what people choose to call this particular genre depends on whether they focus on the unity of the whole or the individuality of the texts.

Whichever term you choose to use, though, the signification is more or less the same: the short story composite is a hybrid genre with aspects of both the novel and the short story collection. In her essay “Faulkner, Welty, and the Short Story Composite,” Sandra Lee Kleppe defines the composite as “a book consisting of several stories that function simultaneously as autonomous units and as parts of an interrelated whole” (173), or as Lundén puts it, “an open work consisting of closed stories” (60). The main characteristic of the composite is “the *tension* between the centripetal unifying strategies and the centrifugal forces of disjuncture,” (Kleppe 173) – or between the connectedness of the stories and their independent quality.

In his book *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, James Nagel claims that Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, a book that many critics discuss as a *Bildungsroman*, in fact is a short story composite. Nagel argues that there are several “unifying principles” that connect the stories in *Mango Street*: “the recurring issues of religion, sexual conduct, education, and financial aspirations provide an ideological continuity that affords coherence for the brief short stories that constitute the volume” (106); “a continuing, first-person narrative voice” (107); and that the stories are organised chronologically (107). These are qualities that one would also expect to find in a novel. However, the aspect that in Nagel’s opinion makes the book a composite (or short story cycle as he calls it), as opposed to a novel, is the autonomy of every story; that “each story in the collection could stand on its own if it were to be excerpted” (Ellen McCracken quoted in Nagel 107). The stories are at the same time independent narratives and parts of a connected whole. Depending on from which angle we look at it, we can see

the book as many or as a whole; the boundaries between the narratives are at the same time present and nonexistent. Together these features all contribute to the distinctive tension between what Mann calls simultaneous self-sufficiency and interrelatedness (15). Forrest Ingram sums it up nicely when he asks,

When do the many cease being merely many and congeal into one? Conversely, when does a “one” become so discrete and differentiated that it dissolves into a “many”? Every story cycle displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other, the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole. (19)

Within the short story composite Rolf Lundén, one of the principal theorists on the composite, suggests four subgenres with “general structural patterns” arranged from tightly to loosely organised: *cycle*, *sequence*, *cluster*, and *novella* (37). Lundén himself admits that the substructures “are not absolute but ... overlappings occur, and, also, ... there may well be short story composites that do not fit any of these patterns” (37). If these categories are so vague that a given composite might fit in one, several, or none of them, one might ask how necessary or useful such subgenres are. I will suspect that it does not add much to the reading of a text to know where it is located “on a scale from closure to openness” (Lundén 37).

While Lundén’s subgenres are based on structure, Mann suggests a thematic subdivision. An important subgenre, says Mann, is “based on the *bildungsroman*: stories joined together to describe the development of a young person, generally from adolescence to maturity” (8-9).<sup>5</sup> Some do follow one protagonist throughout the book, but in others each story has a new protagonist – or the same ones only appear in a few

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<sup>5</sup> I believe, however, that this hybrid, which I call bildungscomposite, enriches the *Bildungsroman* genre more than it does the composite, and if we consider it as a further development of the *Bildungsroman*, new possibilities open up: the form of the composite allows the author to focus on essential events in the life of the protagonist. In addition, the possibility of a composite protagonist makes it possible to portray the *Bildung* of a people, rather than the traditional focus on only one central character. This is the focus of the concluding part of the thesis.

stories – the different characters forming what Mann calls a ““composite personality””

(10). In relation to one of the texts in *Woman Hollering*, “Little Miracles,” Mermann-

Jozwiak says that

Through its large cast of characters and polyphony of voices, the story ... challenges constructions of a singular and homogenous Chicano subject; instead, these petitions reflect heterogeneity through the multiplicity of concerns and tensions evident in the lives of Chicanas and Chicanos. (109)

This is also a representative statement of the whole book; the “polyphony of voices” resist generalisation and make up a diverse collective identity, or composite personality.

One example of a short story composite with a composite protagonist is Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time*. Here we see Nick Adams appearing in only some of the stories, but the other protagonists are so similar to him that they almost blend into one character. Mann explains that “Carl Wood argues that *In Our Time* is unified by a composite personality which is based primarily on Nick Adams but which extends beyond his individual personality” (75). She also states that “The form of the cycle<sup>6</sup> is especially well suited to describe the maturation process, since it allows the writer to focus only on those people and incidents that are essential to character development” (9). I will come back to the combination of *Bildung* and short story composite at the end of this chapter.

“The major difference between the two groups [single vs. composite protagonist],” Mann says, “is that those with a composite protagonist are in a better position to generalize” (10). However, I think that a composite protagonist can also have the opposite effect: the different characters let the author express diverse aspects of the people she/he wants to portray without the danger of character inconsistency.

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<sup>6</sup> Her preferred term for the short story composite.

Also, I think one should be careful not to be too generalising. A group of people is made up of individuals that cannot be lumped into one category and labelled without bearing in mind the uniqueness of their personalities. I therefore choose to see the composite personality in *Woman Hollering* not as an “archetypal” Chicana/o, but as a multifaceted identity reflecting the many paths a person can take. This is a similar view to the one Brewster Ghiselin takes in relation to *Dubliners*: “the separate histories of its protagonists [compose] one essential history, that of the soul of a people” (quoted in Mann 31). The structure of the composite, with its tension between the individual and the whole,

“lends itself to an exploration of the unique cultural identity shared by a group of people, whereas the novel is suited to an intensive study of an individual or a few individuals. The composite, in other words, offers a panoramic view of a setting and its people, whereas the novel’s form demands limitation of focus to individuals.” (Joanne Creighton quoted in Mann 10)

Thus, a short story composite with a composite protagonist is a good vehicle for portraying Chicanos/as, because it allows for both generalising and exploring different aspects of a people. The cultural-social backdrop of *Woman Hollering* is so complex and fragmented that it would not have been properly represented by a traditional individual protagonist. As Richard Rodriguez states in his article “Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy”: “the novel, in my opinion, is not a form capable of being true to the basic sense of communal life that typifies Chicano culture. What the novel as a literary form is best capable of representing is solitary existence set against a large social background” (27). I will therefore argue that a composite personality, on the other hand, is able to capture the multiplicity of a heterogeneous community like the Chicanos.

We can find several of what Kleppe calls the “key criteria of the composite” in Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering* (173): each story has its own title, which helps to establish its individuality. The stories are also autonomous narratives and can stand alone – several of the stories have been anthologised, and many of them were first printed in magazines before they were published as a book. Features that unite the stories are common themes, and setting, e.g. the negotiation of the borders between countries, cultures, languages, religions, and genders. We can also see, as Wyatt suggests, a theme of redefining cultural myths and also, I think, questioning and challenging received knowledge and established religious notions. Another connecting device is the composite personality that can be gathered from the different protagonists in the stories. The process of *Bildung* also serves as an organising principle that links the stories together. Together, these features make up a “balance between the closural strategies of the individual stories and the openness of the volume as a whole” (Kleppe 173), that is, again, the tension between the “simultaneous independence and interdependence of the stories” (Mann 12).

### **The *Bildungsroman***

As previously mentioned, the *Bildungs* process serves as a structuring device that links together the stories of *Woman Hollering*, and I will come back to this after a short survey of the history of the *Bildungsroman*.

The *Bildungsroman* is commonly associated with 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795) is generally considered the archetypal *Bildungsroman* from which the genre originated. The word *Bildungsroman* is German, and is a compound made up of *Bildung* (education) and *Roman* (novel). Attempts at translating it have led to terms like “the novel of youth, the novel of

education, of apprenticeship, of adolescence, of initiation, even the life-novel” (Jerome H. Buckley quoted in Labovitz 2), but none of these can replace the original term. The German word is largely kept in the English language of literary criticism today, perhaps because of the difficulties of defining the genre and finding an English equivalent for it.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes the classical *Bildungsroman* as “A novel that has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person (a type of novel traditional in German literature).” Since its “birth”, the genre has moved out of Germany and developed, and there has been much discussion around how to properly define it. It seems impossible to agree on a definition and attempts to characterise the genre have been criticised for being too broad or too narrow: too wide a definition is incapable of defining anything, and a too narrow one leaves too many novels out. In his essay “The Bildungsroman for Nonspecialists: An Attempt at a Clarification” Jeffrey Sammons states that if the term is applied too indiscriminately, it would “introduce an uncontrollable arbitrariness into the usage of the term that, in turn, raises the question why we should retain it at all” (35). In his own attempt at defining the genre, Sammons suggests that “the Bildungsroman should have something to do with *Bildung*, that is, ... the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through acculturation and social experience to the threshold of maturity ... It does not much matter whether the process of *Bildung* succeeds or fails” (Sammons 41).

An intrinsic aspect of the *Bildungsroman* is the rite of passage, a process that, according to Thomas Vallejos, is “associated with any life crisis, such as birth, puberty, marriage, death, or any important change of a person’s state, social position, or age” (6). It signifies a transformation of the protagonist, and e.g. the puberty rite of

passage can be divided into three phases: 1) “separation of the child from the parents,” 2) the “transitional phase,” and 3) “aggregation, or reintegration” into society (Vallejos 6). These three stages are also representative of what the *Bildungs* hero goes through during the course of the book, and the last phase, reintegration, was an important part of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. After being off on his own and discovering himself, the hero returns to society and becomes an integrated part of it. Annie O. Eysturoy explains that “According to Hegel, [the *Bildungs* hero’s] path to maturity and wholeness, steers him toward an acquiescence to existing social values and norms” (9). However, for aggregation to be at all possible there needs to be a unified society for the protagonist to return to. As Mermann-Jozwiak points out, today “unitary systems of values or stable centers of reference no longer exist” (113). Eysturoy confirms and elaborates on this, saying that “uncertainties of contemporary life are reflected in the often indeterminate endings of the modern *Bildungsroman*, in which social integration is only obtained through some kind of compromise” (10).

### **The female *Bildungsroman***

Very few of the *Bildungsromane* written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were by women and about women and the ones that did have a female heroine were not acknowledged as *Bildungsromane* until later. There were, of course, 19<sup>th</sup> century novels with female protagonists but these did not quite fulfill the qualifications of the *Bildungsroman*. In her book *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, Esther K. Labovitz states that “even those works which started out as potential female *Bildungsromane*, traced the heroine’s growth up to her physical maturity to the neglect of her potential for further development” (5). A novel might start out as a *Bildungsroman*, but the heroine’s quest for self-discovery, which is one

of the major characteristics of the *Bildungsroman*, is not followed through. Labovitz calls this “nineteenth century novel which began as and then faltered in its attempt to trace a heroine through her various stages of development, ... the ‘truncated female *Bildungsroman*’” (6).

The late arrival of the *Bildungsroman* heroine, Labovitz further suggests, was due to the fact that *Bildung* was not available to women in the nineteenth century. Women were expected to marry, have children and mind the house, and “this new genre was made possible only when *Bildung* became a reality for women, in general, and for the fictional heroine, in particular” (Labovitz 6-7). Labovitz calls it a *new* genre, because there are several differences between the male and the female *Bildungsroman*. In her book, she examines four twentieth century female *Bildungsromane* (Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Doris Lessing’s *Children of Violence*, and Christa Wolf’s *The Quest for Christa T.*) and tries to characterize this new genre and determine how it differs from the traditional male *Bildungsroman*.

Firstly, the heroines do not start their journey with a sense of self like their male counterparts; they “search for a self lost with childhood” (Labovitz 248), and have to completely reconstruct their identity along the way. Secondly, Labovitz states that the female *Bildungsroman* has feminist undertones, even if the protagonist seems to avoid such thinking. The heroine’s place in a patriarchal society and the way this society affects her are important elements of this genre. So is the “rejection [of the patriarchy] in the heroine’s quest for self” (Labovitz 249). A third characteristic is the rebellious nature of these women. They do not resign to their allotted place in society, but “challenge the very structure of society, raising questions of equality, not only of class, but of sexes as well” (Labovitz 251).



These characteristics comprise that new genre, the female *Bildungsroman*. As Labovitz puts it, “Even while these writers attached themselves to a traditional genre, they elaborated upon the older structure, challenged its assumptions, and finally fashioned it into *Bildungsromane* representative of women’s culture” (257).

### ***The House on Mango Street as Bildungsroman***

As mentioned briefly before, one book that is frequently discussed as a *Bildungsroman* is Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. However, it fits in neither the traditional, male category, nor entirely in the new genre of female *Bildungsroman* suggested by Labovitz. What Cisneros has done with *Mango Street* is another “rewrite” of the *Bildungsroman* genre. The book, divided into 44 short chapters, follows the protagonist Esperanza, a young Chicana growing up in a Chicago barrio, through one year of her life when the family lives on Mango Street. In her essay “Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the ‘Bildungsroman’ in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*” Maria Karafilis discusses the changes Cisneros makes. Initially Karafilis describes the classical *Bildungsroman* as “a novel that relates the development of a (male) protagonist who matures through a process of acculturation and ultimately attains harmony with his surrounding society” (63). This is a genre that does not meet the needs and intentions of women writers of colour and, like Labovitz’s women authors, they need to fashion out of it their own version of the *Bildungsroman* that will be true to their way of writing their version of reality. As Leslie S. Gutiérrez-Jones puts it, “Cisneros must create her own space, and assert her own voice, within a culture not historically open to her” (310).

The first of Cisneros's revisions, Karafilis says, is her privileging of the communal over the individual that has been so important in the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Instead of searching for her identity through "self-absorbed introspection" (Gutiérrez-Jones 300), Esperanza turns outward to the Chicano community as represented by the street she lives on. Many of the chapters are named after people she knows or who live in the neighbourhood, and largely through their lives and mistakes does she discover who she is – or who she wants to be. As Dianne Klein points out, "often Esperanza is guided by examples of women she does *not* want to emulate" (24). When Esperanza at the end of the book states that she will leave in order to return "For the ones [she] left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110), it "reflects a crucial point of difference from the sacred ground of the literary genre upon which Cisneros is poaching" (Gutiérrez-Jones 299). Here we see Esperanza as one of the rebellious *Bildungsroman* heroines who "challenge the very structure of society."

Another change that Cisneros makes is structural: "instead of using a straight, linear narration to chart the chronological coming-of-age of the protagonist, she writes her *Bildungsroman* in a fragmented, episodic form" (Karafilis 67). The chapters are very short and, instead of comprising a causal narrative, they take the form of what Klein calls "epiphanic narrations" (22). This encourages the reader to connect them, fill in the empty spaces, and "construct them into a life, an experience" (Karafilis 67). The circular composition of the text is apparent in the concluding chapter where part of the first chapter is repeated and Esperanza sets out to write the book the reader has just finished reading. However, there is a significant change: the opening lines of the book read, "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina,

and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot" (3). In the last chapter it is changed to "what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong to but do not belong to" (109-10). After moving so many times, "Esperanza ultimately remembers Mango Street, the place where she began" (Karafilis 68).

The last major revision of Cisneros's is "her critique of American materialism and manipulation of the stereotypical 'American Dream' to include those usually excluded – the poor and/or non-white" (Karafilis 66). The house Esperanza dreams of – although she wants "A house all my own. ... Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after" (108) – is not a lonely place. Esperanza does not plan on isolating herself – on the contrary, she imagines housing the homeless in her attic: "Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house" (87). Karafilis disagrees with critics that read this as partaking in a materialist culture, but rather supports Jacqueline Doyle when she says that "Esperanza's dream of a house of her own ... is *both solitary and communal*, a refuge for herself and others" (Doyle quoted in Karafilis 70, Karafilis's emphasis).

To Karafilis, an important element of *Bildungsromane* by women of colour is what she, borrowing the term from Françoise Lionnet, calls "*métissage*", or diversity. Directly translated the French word means cross-breeding – in other words, two different entities coming together and forming a third. In the case of the Chicanas, the Mexican and the Anglo-American cultures merge to form a new culture, a hybrid, which has elements from both but is also different from both. According to Karafilis, "the protagonist's ability to achieve *métissage* – in *The House on Mango Street* to reconcile her Anglo-American and Mexican cultures ... – is the condition for her

success and ... the condition for success in other twentieth-century *Bildungsromane* by women of color” (65). To summarise, these are what Karafilis identifies as Cisneros’s major revisions in *Mango Street*: 1) focus on the community rather than the individual, 2) short, “epiphanic” episodes instead of a linear, causal narrative, 3) she criticises the American materialism and encourages inclusion of the normally excluded.

### **Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra and Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek***

Another book that has been labelled a *Bildungsroman* is Tomás Rivera’s ... y no se lo tragó la tierra/... and the earth did not devour him,<sup>7</sup> which portrays a figurative year in the life of a young boy and gives insight into the life of Chicano migrant workers in the U.S. South-West in the 1940s and 50s. The protagonist tries to remember what he calls “the lost year” (83), which is commonly understood as the lost history of the Chicanos. Through the recovery of his memories, the boy also discovers his own identity. The book is made up of several stories of varying length in which we see no apparent plot progression; the narratives can therefore be read in a random order.

Despite the lack of a linear plot or chapters linked together by causality, Ralph F. Grajeda calls *tierra*

a variation on the *Bildungsroman*, for the focus of Rivera’s work is not on the forging of the individual, peculiar and subjective identity; it is rather informed by a concern for the development of a social and collective self-identification. It is not the particular and idiosyncratic which is revealed but the general and the typical. (80)

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<sup>7</sup> Rivera’s book is commonly referred to as *tierra*.

Most definitions of the *Bildungsroman* emphasise that the genre deals with the *Bildung* of an *individual*. The boy at the beginning and end in *tierra* is the entity that unifies the stories, but he is not a conventional protagonist. Rather, he serves as what Julián Olivares terms “the novel’s central conscious” (13); what we may call a collective identity, the soul of the people. Grajeda states that “The characters ... all are recognizable not through personal quirks in their particular character, but rather because they assume – at least within the context of the Chicano experience – archetypal dimensions” (80).

I will suggest that this is also the case in Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering* where, like in *tierra*, we do not have a series of stories with “traditional narrative causality” and a clear chronologic order (Ramón Saldívar 75), but independent short narratives. Each story has a different narrator, but if seen collectively, these voices can also be understood to represent various aspects of one character, or perhaps different paths a person can take. Together they form what Brady calls “a social identity” (114), or a composite personality. Thus, it is not the identity of one person that is being discovered, but that of a people.

Sammons’s claim that “It does not much matter whether the process of *Bildung* succeeds or fails” (41) implies, the way I see it, a *conclusion* from which it can be determined whether the process has succeeded or failed. Neither in Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering* nor in Rivera’s *tierra* is there a definite ending where we see if the protagonists are successful or not. We never see the people in the last story of *tierra* reach their destination. The truck that is to transport the migrant workers to the farm breaks down and they come to a halt in the middle of the road early in the morning. The last paragraph reads, “the dawn gradually affirmed the presence of objects ... And the people were becoming people” (146). This does not only refer to the individuals

that emerge from the truck being lit up by the sun, but also the shaping of the self of the people. The words “were becoming” (as opposed to “became”) do not signify a completed action, but rather a process that is not complete – they have not yet arrived at their destination; their identity is not fully formed. Similarly, Lupe, the protagonist in the last chapter of *Woman Hollering*, does not succeed in reconnecting with the Mexican culture that was abandoned in an earlier story (“Tepeyac”), but neither does she resign herself to a life apart from that culture. We do not see her achieving *métissage*, but neither does she fail to do so.

In this sense, these *Bildungsromane* are “unfinished”; the process of maturation is not complete. Maybe this is part of the constant process of development that the *Bildungsroman* seems to undergo, and the Chicano *Bildungsroman* is emerging as yet a new formulation of the genre. One of the ways it keeps renewing is by merging with other genres, and this is what *Woman Hollering* does: the *Bildungsroman* and the short story composite come together to form another hybrid genre. This combination is even more suited for portraying maturation, because the fragmented form permits the author to focus on crucial events and episodes in the life of the protagonist. Furthermore, the composite protagonist that a short story composite allows proves a good vehicle for depicting a diverse and heterogeneous people like the Chicanos/as.

## CHAPTER II

In this chapter I will first explain the essentials of what Lundén calls core stories and fringe stories. I will then propose three sets of cores stories in *Woman Hollering*, in other words three different ways of reading the book as a bildungscomposite, and analyse the texts that figure in these. I will also discuss three satellite stories and give my reasons for labelling one of them the fringe story of the composite. Finally I will sum up the three sets of core stories and suggest that one of the texts in fact figures as what Lundén calls the anchor story. The strings of core stories I propose focus respectively on the development of individual, artistic identity; the maturation of a collective identity; and rite of passage. These strings do not correspond to the three life stages that the book is divided into; rather, they traverse these divides, and even overlap each other. Reading *Woman Hollering* as a bildungscomposite offers a fuller understanding of the book than a straightforward sequential reading, because the complexity of a composite allows us to make connections across the divides that the book presents.

*Bildung* and rite of passage are two terms that will be used in this chapter, and I will therefore briefly explain what I understand to be the difference between the two. *Bildung* signifies the maturation of a character (or several characters forming a composite protagonist); in other words, the development of an identity. Rite of passage, as previously mentioned, refers to the three stages that Vallejos calls separation, transition, and aggregation. A complete rite of passage requires *Bildung* because it is a process of *transformation* from one state of being to another. However, while the rite of passage is an important aspect of the *Bildungsroman*, there can be *Bildung* without the three stages of the full rite of passage. The protagonist of the

second part of “Little Miracles,” for example, does mature over the course of that story, but it is not a rite of passage story; her maturation revolves around her reinvention of her own identity, and does not follow the stages of the rite of passage.

## About core stories

Rolf Lundén adopts Seymour Chatman’s terms *kernels* and *satellites*<sup>8</sup> to indicate two types of stories in the short story composite. The kernel, or core, stories are the central stories of the book; they carry the plot and cannot be removed without doing extensive damage to the composite. The satellite stories are more marginal. They are less significant to the plot, and may be deleted or replaced without damaging “the narrative logic,” “although such deletion will naturally lead to an aesthetically impoverished text” (Lundén 126). The most marginal satellite is what Lundén calls the fringe story, and I will come back to this shortly.

“Anchor story” is what Lundén terms “*the kernel story*<sup>9</sup> of the volume” (124). It often assumes a dominant position in the composite by being longer than the other stories, and has an interruptive function much in the same way as the fringe story. The anchor story, according to Lundén, is most commonly situated at the end or in the middle of the composite, and is often recognised by its length. It is generally the longest story in the book, but there are exceptions, e.g. “Godliness” in Anderson’s *Winesburg*. I will come back to the anchor story of *Woman Hollering* at the end of this chapter.

Lundén analyses several short story composites in terms of core, satellite, and fringe stories, and suggests that in Hemingway’s *In Our Time* the core stories are

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<sup>8</sup> Which Chatman in turn has translated from Roland Barthes’s terms *cardinal* functions and *catalysers* (Lundén 125).

<sup>9</sup> Lundén’s preferred term for core story.



those concerning Nick Adams. The “non-Nick” stories are less central and constitute the satellite stories (132). *Woman Hollering* however, does not have one single character, like Nick, who can be said to unite the book, so the core stories must be identified in another way. The titles of *Woman Hollering*’s three parts are the same as one of their stories; part one and two (“My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn” and “One Holy Night”) is named after the first story of the section, the third (“There Was a Man, There Was a Woman”) takes its title from the antepenultimate story of the book. Their foregrounding may suggest that they hold some special significance, which might indicate that there is one core story, at least, in every section. Another way of looking at it is in terms of length. In a book like *Woman Hollering*, where so many of the stories are very short (in fact, of all the 22 stories, only six are longer than five pages), it might be reasonable to think that the longest stories are the most important ones. This is partly true because, as I will show below, all the longest stories are cores stories (except for “Eyes of Zapata,” which is the fringe story). However, it is not the length that makes them core stories.

Since *Bildung* is the organising principle of the book, I will argue that the core stories in *Woman Hollering* are the ones that demonstrate *Bildung*, that is, a transformation of the protagonist (or composite protagonist). However, the composite protagonist complicates the reading, because through the different characters *Bildung* is represented in different ways, and indeed, *Woman Hollering* presents three different *Bildungs* trajectories that traverse the tripartite division of the book. These all reflect important elements of *Bildung*, of which no one can be considered more important than the other two, and this makes it impossible to isolate one finite set of core stories. I will suggest three ways of reading the book as a bildungscomposite through the three strings of core stories. These focus respectively on the quest for individual

identity; maturation of a composite personality; and rite of passage. However, the strings are not mutually exclusive, and they overlap: some of the stories figure in two of the sets, and “*Bien Pretty*” appears in all three. This overlapping makes it impossible to organise the analyses of the core stories according to strings, and I will therefore discuss the core stories in the order they appear in the book. I will come back to a more thorough examination of the core story strings in the next chapter.

One set of core stories consists of “Tepeyac,” “Never Marry a Mexican,” “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” and “*Bien Pretty*.” This string shows a development of individual identity, starting with “Tepeyac,” in which the narrator starts her life in Mexico City, but at the end of the story we see her removed from her childhood’s culture. The next two stories relate two women trying to redefine the roles imposed on them by society. In “Never Marry,” Clemencia’s attempt at reinventing her part in her relationship with her lover is less than successful, as she ends up replacing one set of qualities with another within the same gender role system. Chayo in “Little Miracles,” however, succeeds in rediscovering herself through an alternative approach to religion and the goddess *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. In the final story, “*Bien*,” we see Lupe trying, and failing at (re)connecting with the culture abandoned in “Tepeyac.” It is also significant that all four protagonists are artists,<sup>10</sup> as the quest for identity is often tied to the act of creating.

The second set of core stories shows the maturation of a collective identity through four women’s reactions to betrayal. The stories analogue the position of Chicanas in relation to, and their increasing independence from men. This collective identity becomes gradually more self-assertive, and the focus is being shifted from the men to the women themselves. The narrator of “One Holy Night” is betrayed by her

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<sup>10</sup> In “Tepeyac” this is only implied, but I will come back to that later.

“Mayan prince,” Chaq, but in the end claims that she still loves him. Cleófilas in “Woman Hollering Creek,” betrayed by her abusive husband, stays with him for a while and hopes that things will work themselves out, but eventually she realises that she needs to get away from him, for her own and her children’s sake. Clemencia in “Never Marry,” betrayed by her “Cortez,” tries to regain power after her lover leaves her, but in order to keep that “power” she represses her “feminine instincts.” She takes on the role of the man in the relationship and in doing this she remains trapped within the polarised woman-man gender roles. Her strategy for attaining control is destructive and hurtful, and she becomes obsessed with Drew and his family. Lupe in “*Bien*” does have a little meltdown after her “Prince Popo” leaves her, but she is able to rise above her heartache, and repaints the volcano painting, thus “repainting” her relationship with Flavio.

A third set of core stories focuses more specifically on the three stages of the rite of passage and includes four stories that represent these: “Tepeyac” relates the first stage, separation from the parents. “Holy Night” and “My *Tocaya*” indicate the middle, liminal, stage of transformation. “*Bien*” is the last part, reintegration into society. As we shall see, aggregation proves difficult for this diverse composite protagonist and when the book ends, the final stage is not yet complete.

### **About the fringe story**

As mentioned initially in this chapter, another distinguishing feature of the short story composite is the fringe story, the most marginal of Lundén’s satellites. As the name suggests, it is situated on the fringes of the composite; it is “so different from the others ... that it claims special status and may stick out as neither completely integrated ... nor completely independent” (Kleppe 179). It often differs from the

other stories in terms of setting, theme, characters, etc., and although it might seemingly have nothing in common with the others, there is always some link between them. Together with other elements that contribute to the interruption of the composite, e.g. the autonomy and individual titles of each story, the purpose of the fringe story is to create a break in the flow. It causes disruption in the unity of the work and is, says Lundén, “the very sign, though not the only one, of the disruption that characterizes this mode of writing” (125).

Due to its disturbingly different nature there have been several different strategies for managing the fringe story. Lundén lists the three most common. One is to simply ignore it – if its presence is not acknowledged, it does not have to be dealt with – or reject it as a “mistake” that should not have been included in the composite. Another tactic is to force it into conformity by imposing on it qualities it does not have, and make it into something else in order to make it fit in with the others. The third is perhaps the most interesting one: the fringe story, despite its marginality, is “elevated into a paradigmatic position” and understood as conveying the “essence” of the composite (Lundén 125). Lundén, however, rejects all three approaches. He holds that to reject or ignore the fringe story, to try to forcibly integrate it, or to read it as a metaphor for the whole composite is to deny the fringe story its very purpose, as its function is exactly to “disturb the harmony” of the composite (132). He argues that we need to acknowledge its presence and allow the fringe story its marginality, “even if it thereby constitutes a challenge to our sense of wholeness” (Lundén 136). We have to overcome our desire for unity and order and accept the partially disunited nature of the short story composite. Kleppe agrees, and warns us not to “[try] to see too much cohesion where there is tension and juxtaposition” (177).

In *Woman Hollering* there are several satellite stories; stories that stick out, either in terms of form or topic. I will discuss three of them: one from the first part of the book (“childhood”), and two from the last section (“adulthood”). I will argue that the fringe story is “Eyes of Zapata.” Although the other two texts are marginal in their own way, “Zapata” is the one that stands out the most and contributes to the disruption of the unity. The second part of the book (“adolescence”) consists of only two stories and none of them is marginal, because they can both be read as rite of passage stories in themselves, although with different outcome; one is “successful,” the other interrupted. I will come back to this in the discussion of part II.

## **THE CORE STORIES**

### **“Tepeyac”**

“Tepeyac” is the last text of the book’s first section. The preceding stories are “My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn,” “Eleven,” “Salvador Late or Early,” “Mexican Movies,” “Barbie-Q,” and “Mericans.” Apart from “Salvador,” which I will come back to later, these are all largely untroubled childhood stories about friends, Barbie dolls, and movies. “Tepeyac” is told by an adult narrator who left Mexico City and moved to the U.S. as a child, and who recollects a memory from her childhood of herself following her grandfather home after he has closed up his shop one night. The story starts with the sky over Tepeyac in Mexico City, once the location of a temple to the Aztec goddess Tonantzín, now the site of a basilica dedicated to La Virgen de Guadalupe. As the dark descends “in an ink of Japanese blue,” the focus turns

downwards, past the bell tower and the church, and the vendors of the plaza: the souvenir photographers, the balloon vendors, the shoe shiners and the women selling food. The narrator does not romanticise the scene, but comments on the contrast between rich and poor with observations like “the red-canopied thrones of the shoeshine stands ... when the shoeshine men have grown tired of squatting on their little wooden boxes,” remarks that picture the shoe shiners kneeling in front of the customer like a worshipper would in front of a deity (21).<sup>11</sup>

The plaza’s photographers are mentioned several times throughout the short story, and establish the idea of the scene as a photograph or a postcard, with the basilica towering in the background like a “souvenir [backdrop] of La Virgen de Guadalupe” (21). The downwards motion and the initial mention of ink also suggest the narrator as an artist, painting her way down from the sky to her shoes. She is the first of several artist protagonists in the composite, and I will come back to a discussion of female artist protagonists later.

In contrast to the very carefully described visual aspect of the setting, there are very few sounds in this first part of the story. The only ones mentioned are the grandfather talking to the shop boy and then counting money in a whisper (22), the counting perhaps pointing to the counting of steps and years which will come later. The feeling of silence reinforces the photograph-image, but it also gives the memory an unreal, perhaps dreamlike, quality that is strengthened by the dark, the absence of people, and several images of sleep, e.g. the metal curtains “like an eyelid over each door” (22); “fall asleep as we always do ... the Abuelito snoring” (23). The Mexico City of the past seems even more peaceful as it is contrasted with the city as the

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<sup>11</sup> All references to *Woman Hollering Creek* are to the 2004 Bloomsbury edition.

narrator experiences it when she comes back: “the streets suddenly dizzy with automobiles and diesel fumes” (23).

The description of the setting ends with Abuelito who is closing up his shop. Then the narrator arrives and accompanies her grandfather home. On the way they walk through a part of the city that is very familiar to the narrator. She has memories connected to many of the buildings and people, and comments on them as they pass through the neighbourhood. When they reach the house on La Fortuna, number 12, the girl and Abuelito count the steps as they walk up the stairs. At first it is only the child and the grandfather counting, but somewhere the narrator as an adult starts counting the years until her return. At one point the two versions of the narrator count together, past/memory and present coexisting. The child counts steps, but the adult narrator adds to the numbers further meaning. After “veintidós” the girl and Abuelito have reached the top of the stairs but the adult keeps counting the years, and we go from memory of the past to the present, where she returns to the city (23).

The noise and commotion of the Mexico City of the present drags us out of the photograph/dream when the narrator returns many years later: the Abuelito is dead, his shop is converted to a pharmacy, the house on La Fortuna is sold, and the streets are inhabited by people she does not know. The once familiar neighbourhood is strange to her now, and the changes hint to the life she might have had if she had stayed. The basilica, a symbol of eternity, is now “crumbling and closed,” symbolising what she thought would be there forever but is now gone (23).

Throughout the first part of the story there is a sense of conclusion: it is darkening, people are closing, packing up their things and leaving the plaza, and when the narrator arrives she and Abuelito are seemingly the only ones left. The only voice heard before they reach the house is the grandfather telling the boy who works for

him “Arturo, we are closed” (21), and Abuelito’s counting money, which suggests a sort of backwards count-down and hints at the counting of steps and years later in the story that will remove him from his grandchild. The narrator also reveals that she will “soon” be leaving, which might indicate that this is the last memory she has of her grandfather and that this marks a turning point in her life.

The narrator refers to herself as “the one who will leave soon for that borrowed country ... the one he will not remember, the one he is least familiar with” (23). As well as signifying steps and years, the counting also indicates the increasing distance between the narrator and Abuelito and Mexico as she travels through the borderland and into the United States, “that borrowed country,” a country she never will feel completely comfortable with or at home in. It seems that her leaving terminates her relationship with the grandfather and severs her ties to Mexico, and it is the loss of this bond she refers to when she talks about “something irretrievable, without a name” that died with the grandfather (23). However, the fact that she counts in Spanish, and continues in that language when the adult narrator takes over, suggests that she has not completely lost touch with the Mexican culture, at least not with the language, although everything else is strange and unfamiliar. She might try to get back to the culture of her childhood through the language, but it does not seem like she succeeds: the word “irretrievable” has a finality to it.

The final sentence of “Tepeyac” reads “Who would’ve guessed, after all this time, it is *me* who will remember when everything else is forgotten, you who took with you to your stone bed something irretrievable, without a name” (23, emphasis mine). The memory is so vivid to the narrator, and so important, because the reality of her childhood is no longer part of her life and she has not been there to see it change.



Abuelito was an important link to the culture of her past and through remembering him she evokes the time of her childhood.

By recalling this one specific memory the narrator lets a piece of the past resurface and help her acknowledge what she sacrificed when she crossed what Mary Pat Brady calls “the multiple borders between Mexico and ‘that borrowed country,’ between memories and expectations” (122). The story is about what the narrator gives up when she moves to the United States, and “‘Tepeyac’ allegorizes the costs of these crossings” (Brady 122).

“Tepeyac” is the first core story of the book and the only one in the first section. It represents the first stage in a rite of passage, the removal of the initiate, or protagonist, from her parents, or parent culture; something she can identify with. We see the protagonist in familiar surroundings before she is detached from them. The text also hints that the last phase, the return to this society, will be difficult for the collective identity of *Woman Hollering*.

### **“One Holy Night”**

“One Holy Night” is the story of a young girl who “[goes] bad from selling cucumbers” (27). Every Saturday she sells fruit from a pushcart, and she falls in love with one of her customers, a man who calls himself Chaq Uxmal Paloquín and claims to be a descendant of Mayan kings, and seduces her with his mysteriousness and his exotic culture. He eventually takes her home to his room, they have sex and she gets pregnant. After this, Chaq disappears and the girl’s grandmother sends her across the border to Mexico to live with relatives. She later finds out that the love of her life turns out not to be a son of kings after all, but an alleged mass murderer named Chato (“fat-face”).

The text is a rite of passage story where the protagonist is transformed from child to adult, and from child to mother; in other words a successful case of *Bildung* (as opposed to “My *Tocaya*,” which I will come back to shortly). The sexual act serves as an initiation into the ranks of adults, of the “knowing.” The girl’s social position is changed, if only in her mind at first because she is the only one who knows about it. However, it is her understanding of her own transformation that is important, not how everyone else sees her. She takes her place among the world’s women: “suddenly I became a part of history ... We were all the same somehow, laughing behind our hands ... I was wise” (30-31). The girl’s equation of wisdom with adulthood brings to mind the narrator of “Eleven,” Rachel, and her assumption that with age comes knowledge.

The second phase of the rite of passage, transition, is the most problematic and painful for the initiate, and it is “accompanied by darkness and containment of the initiate in a symbolic womb or tomb. In contrast, the final stage of the process brings enlightenment and rebirth” (Vallejos 6). Chaq’s tiny room, which “used to be a closet” (29), with one small window and a dirty cot, resembles a cell or a tomb, and it is here that the girl’s initiation takes place.

Since the girl does not know Chaq, he is able to reinvent himself as he likes: “What I knew of Chaq was only what he told me, because nobody seemed to know where he came from” (29). He does not tell her how old he is, or where he really comes from – in fact, not a single thing he tells her about himself is true. He claims to be “of an ancient line of Mayan kings” (27), and creates a persona drawing from the old Maya civilisation; the names he adopts for himself are real names of places, and of figures from Maya religion. The first part of his name, Chac, was a Mayan rain god.

At the city of Chichén <sup>12</sup> he was associated with human sacrifice, and this may be a hint towards what we later find out about Chaq: that he presumably murdered eleven girls and hid the bodies in a cave. The middle part of his name, Uxmal, was an ancient Mayan city in the Yucatán region of Mexico, so in a way he is telling the truth when he says “this is where I come from, the Yucatán, the ancient cities” (27) – at least this is where he found his imagined identity. Chac was an important god in Uxmal, and the inhabitants “frequently invoked the assistance of Chac in their architectural symbolism, hieroglyphs, and human sacrifices” (Britannica). Around 900 there was also a ruler of the city who dubbed himself Lord Chac. The Temple of the Magician, where Chaq says he went to pray with his father as a boy, is an actual temple, located at the top of the Pyramid of the Magician in Uxmal. The doorway to the temple is in the shape of a Chac mask.

The girl, too, gets drawn into his mythmaking. She completely surrenders to his story and makes a place for herself in it, wanting to be part of something great and ancient: “So I was initiated beneath an ancient sky by a great and mighty heir – Chaq Uxmal Paloquín. I, Ixchel, his queen” (30). She invokes the moon of Tikal, Tulum and Chichén, all ruined ancient Mayan cities in the Yucatán region, and she, too, reinvents herself in a way – as Ixchel, the Mayan “goddess of weaving, medicine, and childbirth” (Britannica), and Chaq’s “queen.”

There is a strong sense of ceremony and religion throughout the story, and not only with regards to the girl’s transformation. Chaq mythologises himself and their whole relationship with his talk about gods and stars and how “he is Chaq, Chaq of the people of the sun, Chaq of the temples,” and we can see that the girl is drawn into his storytelling in her description of the way he talks: “what he says sounds

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<sup>12</sup> The full name of the city is Chichén Itzá.

sometimes like broken clay, and at other times like hollow stick, or like the swish of old feathers crumbling to dust” (29). He creates an atmosphere of secrecy as well, and gives the girl a feeling of being special, or chosen, when he tells her that “You must not tell anyone what I am going to do” (30). There is also some Catholicism and witchcraft mixed in with the Mayan myths: when Abuelita finds out that the girl is pregnant, she sprinkles holy water on her head, and when the girl comes to Mexico “one wrinkled witch woman ... rubs [her] belly with jade” (27). These two sets of religious practices demonstrate the heterogeneous culture of the borderland.

The girl has certain expectations about men and about love that she has probably gathered from girlfriends, magazines, and tv, which broadcast what Saldívar calls “the ideologies of romantic love” that “serve as the propaganda for the maintenance for the sexual economy that makes women ... victims merely because they are women” (186). The women are taught to be passive and patient and wait for their true love so that they can experience “passion in its purest crystalline essence. The kind the books and songs and *telenovelas* describe when one finds, finally, the great love of one’s life” (*WHC* 44). Chaq takes advantage of this when he romances the girl with tales of temples, gods, and ancient kings. He parrots the mantra of the soap operas and tells her what she wants to hear: “He said he would love me like a revolution, like a religion” (27). With such great expectations it is no wonder she is disappointed when he finally takes her home to his closet with the pink plastic curtains and a bed covered with newspapers. Afterwards she wonders “why the world and a million years made such a big deal over nothing” (30). The way the *telenovelas* and magazines present romance, love, and sex has become such an established “truth” that it does not even occur to her that it might not be true: “I wanted it come undone like gold thread, like a tent full of birds. The way it’s *supposed to be*” (28, emphasis

mine). She has the impression that there is one way that these things work, and that is the way you see it in magazines and on tv.

The grandmother blames the uncle and “the infamy of men” for the girl’s misfortune, the uncle blames the country and Anglo culture, and the girl is treated like some passive creature, entirely a victim of circumstances, seduced by “that *demonio*” (32). And in some ways she *is* very passive, like her “role models” in the magazines and on tv. We shall see that the passivity of the *telenovela* heroines angers another protagonist, Lupe in “*Bien*.” She “want[s] them to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to” (161). The girl in “Holy Night,” however, takes after her fictional sisters. She is the one who gets chosen by Chaq: “I waited every Saturday in my same blue dress. I sold all the mango and cucumber, and then Boy Baby would come finally” (29). He comes to her pushcart and picks her up; she just stands there and waits for him, he is the one who initiates contact when he brings her a cup of Kool-Aid and takes her home to his room.

However, the girl does not see herself as a victim, and she does not accept the role society wants her to take on: “I know I was supposed to feel ashamed, but I wasn’t ashamed” (30). This rejection of the identity society tries to impose on her might be the start of a rebellion against the established gender roles. She rises above the social “rules” that would make the whole thing into something sordid and dirty and holds on to the connection she feels she had with Chaq. Even though she is disappointed by the sexual act, it was, like the title says, holy to her – it made her a woman and a mother, and “suddenly [she] became a part of history” (30).

### **“My *Tocaya*”**

“My *Tocaya*” is different as a rite of passage story from “Holy Night.” The “death” and “resurrection” of a girl here serve as an *incomplete*, or aborted rite of passage: there is no resolution and no change of her state or social position, and therefore no *Bildung*. The start of the story resembles a missing person’s ad: “Have you seen this girl?” (36), but after the first paragraph it morphs into a gossipy monologue about the disappearance, assumed death, and return of a girl who goes to the narrator’s high school, her *tocaya*, Trish. The narrator, Patricia, immediately declares: “Not that we were friends or anything like that. Sure we talked. But that was before she died and came back from the dead” (36). She immediately dissociates herself from the other Patricia and criticises her *tocaya* for her clothes and the way she talks. She also disapproves of the way her name sister uses her name: “does she call herself *la Patee*, or Patty, or something normal? No, she’s gotta be different. Says her name’s ‘Tri-ish’” (37). However, the narrator does not seem to be sure exactly what it is that annoys her, only that she does not particularly like her – in one paragraph she accuses Trish both for “[trying] too hard to fit in” and for insisting on being different (37).

Trish, we are told, works at her father’s taco place, “bored, a little sad, behind the high counters” (36). The description brings to mind someone behind a tall fence, and the image is strengthened by the description of “customers [eating] standing up like horses” (36). Like several of the girls in Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* who are kept in the house by their fathers, brothers and husbands allegedly because they are too beautiful, Trish is fenced in by her father at the taco place.

The narrator calls Trish “The ‘son’ half of Father & Son’s Taco Palace No. 2 even before the son quit” (36), implying that not only did Trish take over her brother’s job at the taco place, but she was considered one of the “sons” even before she had to take

the role of her brother. The narrator and protagonist of Cisneros's *Caramelo*, Celaya, has the same problem. She is the only daughter of a father with six sons, and he consistently refers to his children as "seven sons" (*Caramelo* 319), or "*siete hijos*" (*Caramelo* 80). The plural of the Spanish *hijo* (son) is *hijos* and the plural of *hija* (daughter) is *hijas*, but when referring to a group of children with both boys and girls, the plural is *hijos*, regardless of numbers (ten daughters and one son would still be referred to as *hijos*). This is also the case with other nouns, like *niñas/niños*, and Chicanas/Chicanos. Daughters are grouped together with sons and Chicanas with Chicanos; women are not allowed their own identity and have to share a term that does not signify females, only males. The narrator's short remark brings to mind Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of *nosotras* (we/us, fem.) and *nosotros* (we/us, masc.) in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, where she states that "We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse" (76).

The connection between the two girls in "My *Tocaya*" is initially only their shared name, until Trish brings news that Max Lucas Luna Luna from another high school "thinks Patricia Chávez is real fine," which is "enough to make [Patricia] Trish Benavídez's best girlfriend for life" (39). Trish becomes the medium for the communication between the narrator and Max Lucas Luna Luna, and Patricia is friends with her namesake allegedly only to be able to correspond with Max. Through the narrator's seeming selfishness we get glimpses of her *tocaya*'s life and, although she might try to hide it, we get the sense that she does sympathise with her, e.g. when the narrator reports that the communication with Max Lucas Luna Luna "was painful slow on account of this girl worked so much and didn't have no social life to speak of" (39).

The narrator repeatedly states that she was never really friends with “the freak” (38), but we can detect a kind of admiration in the seemingly critical description of Trish: “destined for trouble that nobody – not God or correctional institutions – could mend” (37) – she does her own thing and cannot be stopped by neither divine nor earthly forces. Patricia is supposedly mad at Trish for disappearing because that means she will not be able to “hook up with” Max Lucas Luna Luna. However, this seems to be an excuse for being friends with her, to keep from admitting that she cares about her. The narrator claims to talk to Trish only to get to Max Lucas Luna Luna but however important he might be to her, in the end her friendship with Trish is prioritised: “I never did get to meet Max Lucas Luna Luna, and who cares, right?” (40). His most important function is to bring the two girls together.

Patricia is frustrated with people at school, “howling real tears, even the ones that didn’t know her” (40). She feels ignored and unappreciated, because she *did* know her, and she *does* care – as opposed to e.g. the P.E. teacher who, she suspects, “*had* to say nice things [about Trish]” (36). The story’s title, too, reveals the narrator’s feeling of belonging. She repeatedly refers to Trish as “my *tocaya*” and by focusing on their shared name she associates herself with her name-sister even though she claims to have no interest in being her friend.

In the end, this all brings new light to Patricia’s initially refusing to acknowledge Trish as her friend. She feels hurt: her friend disappears without a word and does not even bother to mention to her that she is alive until she finally shows up at the police station and announces that she is not dead after all. “My *Tocaya*,” like “Holy Night,” is a rite of passage-story. However, while the narrator in “Holy Night” “successfully,” though painfully, enters into the world of adults, of those who



“know,” Trish’s crossing is incomplete. The first phase of the rite of passage, separation from the parents, is never fulfilled. As the narrator remarks, “All I’m saying is she couldn’t even die right” (40). Trish’s escape from the job, the taco smell, and the abusive father is interrupted and she returns to her parents before any transformation has taken place. The story seems to come from the narrator’s need to talk about the episode more than just wanting to gossip. The girl thinks she has lost a friend, and nobody cares to talk to her about it: “Now why didn’t anyone ask me?” (36)

Drawing on religious historian Mircea Eliade, Thomas Vallejos comments on the ritual process involved in the rite of passage “as symbolic death and rebirth” (Vallejos 6). The death of Trish is not only symbolic but literal, as her body is found, identified by her parents, and she is declared dead. The mistake is discovered when Trish shows up at the police station and is returned to her family. The homecoming indicates the last phase of the puberty rite of passage, reintegration into society, which “marks the return of the initiate to the social structure from which he was separated, although irreversibly transformed by the liminal experience” (Vallejos 6). However the reintegration of Trish happens before this transformation occurs – she is brought back to life, symbolically, but on the wrong side, so to speak. She has not crossed over and entered into a new state of being, but is reeled back into her old life. There is no resolution of her conflicts: she has not escaped the job or the mean father, and she will presumably have even more problems fitting in at school now that she is “famous.” Nothing has changed for her, and she will probably go back to standing behind the counter at her father’s taco place.

These two stories reflect the insecurity and confusion of identity that characterise adolescence, which corresponds to the second stage in a rite of passage. Both girls have problems defining who they are. The girl in “Holy Night” lets a man, Chaq, invent her through *his* (imagined) identity, and she defines herself on his terms when she calls herself “I, Ixchel, his queen.” In “*Tocaya*,” Trish tries to act and dress older than she is, and the narrator criticises her for this. Trish “Invented herself a phony English accent” (37) and uses her name in an untraditional way in order to find her own way of expressing herself, but this is not unquestioningly accepted by her classmates. The fact that she is referred to as one of her parents’ “sons” adds to the identity confusion.

In his essay “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology,” Victor Turner describes the middle phase of a rite of passage, which he calls the liminal phase, as a period of uniformity and anonymity. The initiand is deprived of the symbols of her social standing and regarded as ““outside society, and society has no power over [her]”” (Arnold van Gennep quoted in Turner 130). She is also often spatially removed from the rest of society, and Turner describes the initiand as “meek, weak, and humble” (129). However, being “outside society,” she is also outside the normal laws and rules, and rebellious behaviour is accepted. The liminal period is characterised by ambiguity, insecurity, and disorder, and this largely explains the lack of a marginal story in this section of the book. The normal order of things is disturbed, distinctions are erased, and everything is seen as equally important. This section of the book also stands out because it includes only two stories (as opposed to the first and last parts which contain respectively seven and thirteen stories); the two stories of complete and interrupted rite of passage demonstrate to possible outcomes of the process.

## **“Woman Hollering Creek”**

“Woman Hollering Creek” is the story of a woman, Cleófilas, who marries a man and moves across the border from Mexico to the town with the lovely name, Seguí, Texas. She gets pregnant and has her first son, Juan Pedro, named after his father. After a while Cleófilas’s husband starts beating her, but she tries to be patient and hopes that things will get better, because she has learned from the *telenovelas* that “to suffer for love is good” (45). In the end, however, she realises that she needs to get away from her husband, and with help from her doctor and another woman she flees back across the border.

Like the narrator in “Holy Night,” Cleófilas starts out as a very passive woman. Her husband Juan Pedro is the one in charge of the marriage, and of her. He takes her with him across the border to Seguí and she depends on him for money and transportation. The story starts with, “The day Don Serafín gave Juan Pedro Martínez Sánchez permission to take Cleófilas Enriqueta DeLeón Hernández as his bride, across her father’s threshold, over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town *en el otro lado*” (43). This initial sentence gives the impression of Juan Pedro abducting Cleófilas, or taking off with her like a possession. Other people go over her head and make the decisions for her; she has no real control of her own life.

Once she is in Seguí, Cleófilas’s surroundings give her no choice but to continue being passive and dependent. The lay out of the town makes it impossible to get anywhere without a car and this confines Cleófilas to the house, “Because the towns here are built so that you have to depend on husbands. Or you stay home. Or you drive. If you’re rich enough to own, allowed to drive, your own car” (50-51). The

assumption that a woman would have to ask for permission, presumably from a husband, father or other male relative, to drive a car characterises the attitude of the society Cleófilas exists in. This echoes Anzaldúa's comment that "Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles" (39). She claims that society gives women only three choices: to be a mother, a whore, or a nun.

The narrator remarks that in the town where Cleófilas grew up there was not much to do, but there were relatives and girlfriends, and a town centre you could *walk* to, where you could go to the movies or have a milkshake. In Seguí there is even less to do. Cleófilas does not know anyone in town, and as she cannot get to the town centre without a car, she is confined to the house. So while Cleófilas trades one "town of dust and despair" for another like it (50), it is implied that the town she grew up in on the Mexican side of the border is the better of the two.

There is also a contrast between the social life of the two towns: her hometown in Mexico has a community of women, gossiping on the front steps of the church or in the town centre. In Seguí, "the whispering begins at sunset at the icehouse instead" (50). The icehouse is the men's domain. When they were newlyweds, Cleófilas was allowed to come with her husband, but all she did there was sit and sip her beer, and smile and nod at the right places. The men dominate the talk, and eventually Cleófilas can predict where the conversation is going. She concludes that "each is nightly trying to find the truth lying at the bottom of the bottle like a gold doubloon on the sea floor" (48), but fails because they keep talking in circles and every night rehearsing the same conversations, because "what is bumping like a helium balloon at the ceiling of the brain never finds its way out" (48). As Doyle puts it in her discussion of *la Llorona* in "Woman Hollering Creek", "Their talk will lead nowhere, for the discourse of the

men is strangled as well” (60). The frustration that comes from this inability to communicate is perhaps part of what drives the men to violence, trying to let the fists express what words cannot: “At any given moment the fists try to speak” (48).

However, the men’s gossiping is not confined to the icehouse. Eventually it invades Cleófilas’s home as well, as she hears Juan Pedro and his friends talking through the kitchen window. One of the men, Maximiliano, is said to have killed his wife when she came at him with a mop, and there are countless similar stories in the paper of women killed or beaten by husbands, male relatives, friends or co-workers. The unspoken acceptance of brutality towards women creates a backdrop of violence that serves to ensure that women do as they are told, to keep them in their place.

When her own house loses the feeling of safety, the only place she can go to is the homes of the two neighbour ladies Dolores (“pain”) and Soledad (“solitude”). Firmly embedded in the male-centred mind-set of the society, the women devote their lives to men who are not even there anymore. Soledad’s husband mysteriously disappeared, and Dolores keeps altars to her two dead sons and husband, both “too busy remembering the men who had left through either choice or circumstance and would never come back” (47). They have both resigned to a life of sorrow and solitude, an existence echoed by their names.

Unable to talk to anyone about her situation, Cleófilas takes refuge in the creek behind the house, *la Gritona*. When she first hears the name of the creek, she wonders “whether the woman had hollered from anger or pain” (46) – as a woman in an unhappy marriage unable to do anything about it, she sees no other reason why a woman would yell. As Doyle comments, “Immersed in romance novels and the *telenovelas*, Cleófilas is initiated into a culture of weeping women” (56). She comes to identify the creek with *la Llorona*, a woman who, according to Mexican myth,

drowned her own children in a creek and spends eternity mourning and searching for them. Cleófilas goes from relating to the heroines of the *telenovelas* who suffer for love, to identifying with *la Llorona*, the weeping woman. As Wyatt points out in her discussion of the revision of gender roles and “Never Marry a Mexican” and “Woman Hollering Creek,” “Mexican folklore joins with contemporary Mexican popular culture in offering Cleófilas only ideals of passive female suffering” (256). There are no proactive role-models for Cleófilas to identify with.

Like the narrator in “Holy Night,” Cleófilas has inherited unrealistic expectations of life and love from the soap operas. The *telenovelas* have taught her that “to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow. In the end” (45), and she adopts this as her motto. The last three words of this quote are significant, because they imply that the “sweet” pain is something that needs waiting for. It is added to the mantra of the *telenovelas* almost as an afterthought, as something the narrator, or Cleófilas herself, has worked out from own experience. It is probably this little addition that keeps Cleófilas from doing something about her situation sooner. She is waiting for the pain to become sweet, for the feeling that it has all been worth it – like it always is on tv. It is partly this notion that makes Cleófilas stay with Juan Pedro even after he starts beating her. The first time he hits her, the plain shock of it renders her incapable of doing anything: “she didn’t fight back, she didn’t break into tears, she didn’t run away as she imagined she might when she saw such things in the *telenovelas*” (47).

The house in Seguí does not have a tv, so Cleófilas is not able to watch her beloved *telenovelas* except for sometimes when she visits her neighbour Soledad. Her substitute for the soap operas are romance novels, “what she loved most now that she lived in the U.S., without a television set, without the *telenovelas*” (52). Not until Juan

Pedro throws one of these books at her, a Corín Tellado love story, does she wake up and realise she has to do something. The romance novel finally inflicts physical pain like the *telenovelas* and love stories have hurt her psychologically for so long.

Pregnant with her second child, Cleófilas persuades her husband to drive her to the doctor to make sure the baby is healthy. She promises him not to mention that he beats her and says that if anyone asks, she will say she fell. When she gets there, though, she is not able to keep quiet, and she starts crying. She shows the doctor her bruises and agrees that she needs to get away from Juan Pedro. The doctor arranges for a friend of hers, Felice (“happy”), to pick up Cleófilas and drive her to the bus in San Antonio. The getaway driver Felice is “like no woman she’d ever met” (56). She owns her own truck, which to Cleófilas, living in a town where you need a car in order to get anywhere, has come to represent mobility, freedom and independence, something only men are “allowed” to have. Felice is unmarried and she has picked out and paid for the car herself, and Cleófilas is amazed that a woman can have that kind of freedom and make those kinds of decisions completely on her own, and be in charge of her own life.

When they drive across the creek, *la Gritona*, Felice suddenly starts hollering: she “opened her mouth and let out a yell as loud as any mariachi” (55). Cleófilas is surprised by the unexplained and unexpected outburst, and Felice does not seem to have a reason for yelling, other than just for the sake of it: “I like the name of that *arroyo*,” she says, “Makes you want to holler like Tarzan, right?” (55) By turning the assumed wailing into a yell of joy, Felice reclaims the hollering as something positive and transforms *la Gritona* from a passive, weeping woman into a hollering, truck-driving woman.

Wyatt suggests that in addition to crossing the physical border between the countries, “Felice goes to *el otro lado* – the other side – of the gender border as well, appropriating Tarzan’s cry from the territory of masculinity” (245). Felice makes herself stronger, “steals” strength, by choosing to associate with a strong male figure, just as she has annexed from the other gender the right to own and drive her own truck, and the self-sufficiency and command of her life. At the end of the story, Cleófilas clearly identifies with Felice, the first positive female role model she has had: “Then Felice began laughing again, but it wasn’t Felice laughing. It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water” (56). Wyatt proposes that

The further description of her laughter as a “gurgle,” a “ribbon of ... water,” suggests that this is a three-way merger. The promised identification with the creek has occurred – an identification no longer destructive now that the river’s murmur can be heard as a celebration of female autonomy and mobility. (259)

There are several parallels between Cleófilas and the narrator in “Holy Night.” The link between the two women is suggested for instance by the narrators’ descriptions in both stories of “this town of dust” (27, 50). Also, their men are violent: Juan Pedro beats his wife; Chaq’s aggressive nature is only *implied* through the god he takes his name from (associated with human sacrifice) and his showing the girl the guns in his room, although it is later revealed that the threat of violence would probably had been carried out if the girl had not been forced to leave. Both women end up single mothers and in the end have to rely on family, a family that, perhaps significantly, lives on the Mexican side of the border. They get pregnant in the U.S. and are sent, or flee, to Mexico for safety.

The most noteworthy similarity however, is perhaps the faith they both put in the established “truths” about love, what Saldívar calls “ideologies of romantic love,” distributed by the *telenovelas*, magazines, romance novels, and gossip. In the end,



both women realise that they have been tricked in a way, they reveal the man behind the curtain and understand that “the way it’s supposed to be” is rarely the way it actually is. However, as opposed to the girl in “Holy Night,” who still claims to love Boy Baby even after he has been revealed as a murderer, Cleófilas realises that she needs to get away from her husband and does take action in the end. While the girl is shipped off to Mexico by her Abuelita against her will, Cleófilas takes matters into her own hands and leaves for Mexico to live with her father and brothers. In this way she has come one step further towards taking charge of her own life and towards becoming more like the independent Felice. As Doyle points out, Cleófilas does “[remain] within the patriarchal economy of exchange in returning from husband to father” (61). However, Juan Pedro and Cleófilas’s father are significantly different types of men, and can be seen as representing the two versions of machismo that Anzaldúa describes in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*: “For men like my father, being ‘macho’ meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love” (105). I will suspect that this is a good description of Cleófilas’s father, who at the beginning of the story assures her that “I am your father, I will never abandon you” (43). Unlike Juan Pedro, he never raised a hand to his wife or his children. On the other hand there is her husband, representing what Anzaldúa refers to as “Today’s macho,” who “has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His ‘machismo’ is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem” (Anzaldúa 105). Juan Pedro reacts to his own insecurity and feelings of inadequacy and failure with violence.

In her book Anzaldúa describes the “New Mestiza,” a woman inhabiting both Indian, Mexican, and Anglo cultures, able to move back and forth across the cultural borders, taking from each what makes her stronger and rejecting the restricting

aspects. Anzaldúa states that women have a choice to make: to be a victim and deny responsibility and put the blame on everybody else, or “to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control” (43). Felice has clearly made the choice to be self-sufficient and in control. Cleófilas starts out as very passive and eventually becomes a victim to her husband’s aggression, but in the end she steps up and gets away from Juan Pedro even though it requires a lot of her. The narrator in “Holy Night” also refuses to be a victim, and she stands for what she has done. These are all strong women, each in their own way, and on their way to becoming the New Mestizas that Anzaldúa suggests in the title of her book.

### **“Never Marry A Mexican”**

The title of this story echoes a piece of advice given to the protagonist Clemencia by her mother. Talking about her mother and father, Clemencia states that being born on the U.S. side of the border and being born on the Mexican side is “*not* the same” (68). Her mother advises her not to marry a Mexican, meaning a man from the Mexican side of the border. Clemencia, however, lumps all the men of Latin America into one category, “Mexican,” with the announcement,

Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Chilean, Colombian, Panamanian, Salvadorean, Bolivian, Honduran, Argentine, Dominican, Venezuelan, Guatemalan, Ecuadorean, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Costa Rican, Paraguayan, Uruguayan, I don’t care. I never saw them. My mother did this to me. (69)

She sees the difference between Mexican Mexicans and U.S. Mexicans, but everyone born outside the U.S. she puts together in one category. With this statement Clemencia shows herself as a true American as Richard Rodriguez describes them in *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*: “Most Americans are soft on geography. We

like puzzles with great big pieces, pie-crust coasts” (117). He further points out that “Hispanics” only exist in the U.S., or rather in the minds of people in the U.S.: “Only America could create Hispanics, Asians, Africans, Americans” (Rodriguez, *Brown* 119) – not bothering with the distinctiveness of different groups, all are given one label.

Clemencia is the first of three artist protagonists in *Woman Hollering*, the other two being Chayo in “Little Miracles” and Lupe in “*Bien Pretty*.” As previously mentioned, the narrator in “Tepeyac” can also be read as an artist, but she does not explicitly identify herself as one. Her creative disposition is only hinted at by the words she uses to describe the sky and the plaza, and by the many mentions of photographers. In her book *Daughters of Self-Creation: The Contemporary Chicana Novel*, Eysturoy writes about how, in *Künstlerromane*, creativity and the act of creation are closely linked to the quest for identity. The *Künstlerroman* is a variety of the *Bildungsroman* where the protagonist not only has artistic aspirations, but acts on them and in the end becomes, or is on the verge of becoming, an artist; “the *Künstlerroman* usually ends on a note of arrogant rejection of the commonplace life” (Britannica). Eysturoy says that creativity has traditionally been associated with males: in literature, religion, and myths, men have been the creators and women the creation.<sup>13</sup> The female artist protagonist not only has to forge her own identity as a woman in a patriarchal society, but also as an artist in a field women have earlier been excluded from; “before self-assertion is possible, woman has to come to terms with not only cultural and social constraints, but also a heritage of patriarchal myths and assumptions about herself as a woman and an artist” (Eysturoy 23).

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<sup>13</sup> This is at least true in Western religion and culture, but in other religions (e.g. ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian) women are often likened to the creative forces of the earth.

Clemencia is an artist by night and a translator/substitute teacher by day. She says “I’d do anything in the day just so I can keep on painting,” although she sees her way of making a living as “a form of prostitution” (71). She sells her services in order to do what she really wants. As an artist she is able to be “amphibious,” to move between classes and transcend the boundaries: the rich people “like to have [her] around because they envy [her] creativity” and will “have [her] decorate the lawn like an exotic orchid for hire” (71); they find her interesting because she has something that they do not have and cannot acquire. The poor accept her because she is as poor as they are. This amphibiousness allows her to inhabit several worlds at once, but it also has the consequence that she does not belong anywhere.

The narrative is an internal monologue, sometimes addressed to her ex-lover Drew, sometimes to his son, and sometimes to no one in particular. As if talking to her ex, Clemencia says, “Drew, remember when you used to call me your Malinalli? It was a joke, a private game between us, because you looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours. My skin dark against yours” (74). As Cleófilas in “Woman Hollering” identifies with *la Llorona*, Clemencia draws a direct parallel between herself and *la Malinche*, Cortez’s translator and mistress who was labelled a traitor for sleeping with the enemy. In associating herself with Malinche and Drew with Cortez, Clemencia pictures him as the invader and herself as the conquered. The image is strengthened by the description of “his toothbrush firmly planted in the toothbrush holder like a flag on the North Pole” (69), which suggests him claiming her like a colonised country. This echoes a footnote in Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in which she writes that men see “woman as a ‘dark continent’<sup>14</sup> to penetrate and to ‘pacify.’ ... Conquering her, they’ve made haste to depart from her borders, to get out

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<sup>14</sup> Sigmund Freud used this image to describe woman as mysterious and uncharted.

of sight, out of body” (2041, footnote). This seems like a good description of Drew’s behaviour: “Before daybreak, [he’d] be gone” (74).

Writing about the legend of Malinche and Cortez, Norma Alarcón says that “the myth contains the following sexual possibilities: woman is sexually passive, and hence at all times open to potential use by men whether it be seduction or rape ... *nothing she does is perceived as a choice*” (quoted in Wyatt 248, emphasis mine). This echoes the way the girl in “Holy Night” is treated by her grandmother and uncle. It is the assumption that women are powerless and feeble victims that Clemencia rebels against, because at the same time that she associates with Malinche, she refuses the passive role imposed on her. As Wyatt points out, “Malinche is characterized not as doing but done to” (248), and Clemencia tries to reverse this by taking the role of the man: “I leapt inside you and split you like an apple” (78). However, “Escaping the crippling polarities of gender is not so simple as appropriating the gestures of masculinity” (Wyatt 245), and in doing this Clemencia only replaces one set of attributes with another. She avoids the role of the passive victim, but in taking on the opposite part, she remains trapped in the “gender dynamic” that “imprisons her in a rigid sex role as surely as if the reversal had not taken place” (Wyatt 249).

The last time Clemencia is with Drew, in the house he lives in with his wife Megan, Clemencia walks around alone while Drew is in the kitchen. The house is “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 [hold] their breath. A kind of airless cleanliness that always made me want to sneeze” (81). Feeling out of place in this spotless house, Clemencia decides to leave her mark. Walking around with a bag of gummy bears, she leaves the candy bears in places where she knows only Megan will find them: in her nail polish bottles, on her lipsticks, and in her diaphragm case.

Finally, coming across a babushka doll, Clemencia “[uncaps] the doll inside a doll inside a doll, until [she gets] to the very center, the tiniest baby inside all the others, and this [she replaces] with a gummy bear” (81). Invading the private space of the wife, marking her territory with gummy bears, is Clemencia’s own way of planting flags. However, it is not Drew whom she claims, but Megan’s role as wife and mother. As Wyatt points out in relation to the numerous “images of maternity,” “it seems that Clemencia’s rage reflects envy, not jealousy ... Clemencia does not so much want to *have* Drew as to *be* Megan, actively mothering” (251).

This premise is strengthened by the possessiveness Clemencia shows towards Drew, and later, his son. Having lost Drew, she develops a fixation with him and his family. As Drew was Clemencia’s teacher, she is the teacher of his son, whom she “created” when she convinced Drew to let him be born: “I’m the one that gave him permission and made it happen” (75). In this way she again places herself in the position of Megan, the mother. Similarly, Clemencia claims that she “created [Drew] from spit and red dust ... You’re just a smudge of paint I chose to birth on canvas” (75). Painting and repainting Drew “the way [she sees] fit” gives her a feeling of power and control (75).

Mullen suggests that “Figuring the artist-intellectual as female, desiring subject, and the community as male, desired object ... complicates the signification of identity, as gender further complicates the artist’s cultural and class identification and *inverts a previous gender coding*” (15, emphasis mine). Clemencia also reverses the gender roles by adopting the role of the man. However, she does not succeed in undoing the polarised sex roles, instead she remains trapped in the old gender role system.

There is a lot of suppressed anger in Clemencia's story. It almost seems like she is angry on behalf of Malinche as well, not only for herself. She is out to exact revenge on "Cortez" and his "readheaded Barbie doll" wife (79). When she leaves the gummy bear inside Megan's babushka doll, she takes out the little wooden doll, "the tiniest baby inside all the others," and takes it with her. On her way home, she stops on a bridge over an *arroyo* and "[drops] the wooden toy into that muddy creek where winos piss and rats swim" (82). Mullen argues that "Clemencia symbolically drowns 'the baby' in a muddy creek, as if re-enacting La Llorona's infanticide" (8), only she does not drown her own "baby," but her rival's. Even though the kidnapping of the wooden doll is something that Megan will probably not discover for a while, if she ever does, it gives Clemencia a feeling of satisfaction knowing that she has taken something away from her, that something belonging to the spotless Barbie doll is lying in the mud: "It gave me a feeling like nothing before and since. Then I drove home and slept like the dead" (82).

### **"Little Miracles, Kept Promises"**

"Little Miracles, Kept Promises" can be divided into two parts. The first nine pages consist of 22 (incidentally the same number as there are texts in the book) petitions pinned on an altar to *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. This text deviates even more from a traditional short story than many of the other texts in the book, because it is plot-less: it does not relate a coherent narrative, but is rather a compilation of many different voices. This first part can be read as a "mini-composite" – or a composite within the composite – with its polyphony of voices, characters and fates making up a composite protagonist. The church where the prayers and offerings are left serves as the setting that brings them together, or in other words, as the unifying device. Like the stories of

*Woman Hollering*, these notes serve as little windows into the lives of anonymous Texas Chicanos/as.

Against the background of the many anonymous voices, one stands out: the second part of the text relates one girl's rediscovery of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*. If we see the first part as a panoramic picture, this internal monologue zooms in on one specific Chicana who pins her severed braid of hair by the statue of Guadalupe and thanks the goddess for letting her see the religion she inherited from her mother in a new way.

This protagonist, Chayo, is the second artist protagonist in *Woman Hollering* and, like Clemencia and Lupe, she is a painter. However, Chayo's desire to be an artist is largely disapproved of or made fun of by her surroundings. Her education has removed her from her family and they feel she has betrayed them by going her own way: "*Is that what they teach you at the university? Miss High-and-Mighty. Miss Thinks-She's-Too-Good-For-Us. Acting like a bolilla, a white girl. Malinche*" (128). As we will see, Lupe in "*Bien*" also feels removed from the culture of her childhood by education, but I will come back to this in the discussion of that story.

Chayo's family make her ambitions feel insignificant with comments like "*Look at our Chayito. She likes making her little pictures. She's gonna be a painter. A painter! Tell her I got five rooms that need painting*" (126). She feels she is not taken seriously and that her opinions are unimportant because she is a woman: "Do boys think, and girls daydream?" (126). In this way she supports Brady's argument that "Cisneros's narrators [in *Woman Hollering*] suggest the significance and sophistication of their heretofore ignored and invalidated knowledge, conceptualizing alternative epistemologies" (114). When Chayo pins her braid by the statue of *la*



*Virgen*, she thanks the goddess for “believing what [she does] is important” when no one else does (127).

Chayo exists in a community where women are expected to marry and have children, and her family rehearse this view when they ask “*Chayito, when you getting married? Look at your cousin Leticia. She’s younger than you. How many kids you want when you grow up?*” (126). Women are defined by being a mother to someone else and not as being a person in their own right. They are supposed to be caring and take care of the family, as opposed to men, who are allowed their own life outside the home. Chayo says that she would rather be a father than a mother, because “a father could still be artist, could love *something* instead of *someone*, and no one would call that selfish” (127). This echoes Anzaldúa’s claim that “only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel total failures if they don’t marry and have children” (39). Chayo goes against this norm when she states that she wants to live alone. One reason for this might be that she sees men (specifically her father) as the source of her mother’s suffering: “I couldn’t see you [*la Virgen*] without seeing my ma each time my father came home drunk and yelling, blaming everything that ever went wrong in his life on her” (127). She also sees her mother’s religion as the thing keeping her from doing something about her situation, and comes to associate *la Virgen* with all the pain her mother and grandmother have gone through. She does not want to become like them and so she initially rejects the entire religion, Guadalupe included. However, as Wyatt points out, referring to Cisneros’s own words, “To reject the cultural icon rather than reconstructing it does not work because Mexican cultural icons of womanhood are ‘part of you,’” (Wyatt 266). Consequently, Chayo must redefine the religion and make it her own in order to live with it.

When she looks for other ways to approach the religion of her mothers, she discovers new sides of Guadalupe. She identifies with the strong aspects of the goddess, and is eventually able to see that there is a quiet strength in her mother and grandmother's self-sacrifice. In the end, Chayo recognises that the goddess is not confined to one religion at all, but is "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" (128) – she sees all the gods that people worship as different aspects of one universal divine force.

Like Felice in "Woman Hollering," Chayo exemplifies Anzaldúa's New Mestiza, and sums up her position in a few sentences when she identifies herself as "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). Her moving between cultures enables her, as Cisneros herself says in an essay, to "[take] from tradition that which nurtures and [abandon] the element which would mean [her] self-destruction" (quoted in Mermann-Jozwiak 112). It is this negotiation of traditions that allows Chayo to reinvent *la Virgen* the way she does, combining Indian, Mexican and Anglo aspects of Guadalupe:

I recognized you as Tonantzín, and learned your names are Teteoinnan, Toci, Xochiquetzal, Tlazolteotl, ... when I could see you as Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Nuestra Señora de los remedios, Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro, ... Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Our Lady of the Rosary. (128)

Movement prevents definitions from becoming fixed, and as a result, Wyatt claims, "A woman living on the border has a better chance of shaking off the hold of any single culture's gender definition because she has to move back and forth between Mexican and Anglo signifying systems" (245). Chayo's description of the border as "This thing between [her] legs, this *unmentionable*" (emphasis mine) furthermore

suggests something taboo, something not talked about, and echoes Benjamin Alire Sáenz's argument that the borderland between Mexico and the U.S. is largely unrecognised by both countries because both use the place as a dumping ground for what they do not want to acknowledge:

And it enrages us that we remain so stubbornly invisible in the eyes of our political and cultural "centers."

Here we sit, on a piece of ground that is literally at the crossroads of the Americas *and we remain invisible*. (Sáenz 8)

Chayo describes her braid as "Something shed like a snakeskin" (125).

Through this comparison she invokes Coatlicue, the Aztec earth goddess of creation and destruction, usually depicted with a skirt made of snakes and a necklace of hands and hearts (Britannica). The long hair she has shed as an offering to *la Virgen* represents her "old self" and her old way of seeing Guadalupe. After cutting it off she feels relieved: "My head as light as if I'd raised it from water" (125). She has managed to rid herself of the preconceived notions of religion and of herself as a woman and artist inherited from her mother and from society. When she is asked "*how could you ruin in one second what your mother took years to create?*" it is implied that Chayo is her mother's creation (125); that the mother has made her into what she thinks her daughter should be, which Chayo is now able to escape by reinventing herself and her views on Catholic religion and *la Virgen*.

### **"Bien Pretty"**

The narrator of "*Bien Pretty*" is Lupe, an independent California Chicana who, after breaking up with her boyfriend, fills her van with her most important belongings and moves from San Francisco to Texas to work as an art director at a community cultural

centre in San Antonio. Like she says, “everything’s bigger and better in Texas, and that holds especially true for the bugs” (139), and after finding a cockroach “pickled inside [her] beer bottle” (143), she calls the pest control. Flavio Munguía Galindo, the exterminator, shows up and Lupe falls in love. She invites him back to model for a painting she wants to make of the twin volcanoes outside Mexico City, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccíhuatl, “that tragic love story metamorphosized from classic to kitsch calendar art” (144), and she wants Flavio to be Prince Popo. We do not know how long they are together, but the relationship ends badly when Flavio one day tells her he has to leave, and in a casual remark mentions that he has seven sons from two previous relationships.

Lupe is the last artist protagonist of the composite. On a postcard to her friend Beatriz she writes, “HAPPY TO REPORT AM WORKING AGAIN. AS IN *REAL WORK*. NOT THE JOB THAT FEEDS MY HABIT – EATING. BUT THE THING THAT FEEDS THE SPIRIT” (147). Like Clemencia in “Never Marry,” Lupe works only so that she can paint and, like Clemencia, Lupe paints her man. However, although Flavio is *her* model, she remarks that, “Flavio [was] always there before me, like if he was the one painting me” (148).

The story not only depicts Lupe’s relationship with Flavio, but also her relationship with Mexican culture and her attempts to (re)connect with it after being removed from it by education. Rodriguez writes about this phenomenon in “Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy,” where he tells about how his career as a “scholarship boy” has removed him from his family and his family’s culture. He writes about how his education made it difficult for him to communicate with his parents and his other Spanish speaking relatives, because, “To succeed in the classroom, I needed psychologically to sever my ties with Spanish. Spanish represented an alternate culture as well as another language – and the basis of my

deepest sense of relationship to my family” (Rodriguez, “Going Home” 17). His education also made him “discover” from the outside the culture he left behind, and he states that “It is possible for the academic to understand the culture from which he came ‘better’ than those who still live within it” (25). Rodriguez needed to distance himself from the culture of his childhood in order to properly comprehend it. He also says that “any future ties one has with those who remain ‘behind’ are complicated by one’s new cultural perspective” (25), i.e. being aware of the “the newly visible culture” as a *culture* (26). He explains that people do not normally regard their traditions and way of life in academic terms: “My parents have neither the time nor the inclination to think about their culture as a culture” (Rodriguez, “Going Home” 25).

Rodriguez’s removal from the Mexican culture also made him appreciate more what he had left and he thinks that this is true of many minority students. He tells about his parents’ surprise when they saw a group of minority students on a college campus wearing serapes, and states that “the minority group student has gained a new appreciation of the culture of his origin precisely because of his earlier alienation from it. As a result, Chicano students sometimes become more Chicano than most Chicanos” (25-26).

The implication here is that the most “authentic” (if such a word should be used) Chicanos/as are the ones that are unaware of their culture. The self-conscious scholars who have removed themselves from the culture of their childhood try too hard to belong and may come off as awkward or it may result in, as Rodriguez puts it, “sometimes even clownish, re-creations of” the culture of one’s past (27). Anzaldúa also comments on this: “the more tinged with Anglo blood, the more adamantly my colored and colorless sisters glorify their colored culture’s values” (44).

I think we can see Lupe in Rodriguez's description of the minority group students. Although we know nothing about Lupe's educational background, it is clear that she is well aware of Chicano/Mexican traditions as a culture, and has certain expectations as to how she thinks a proper Chicano/a or Mexican should dress and behave. She is very conscious about her cultural identity and may exaggerate elements of it that is not natural to someone who grew up inside the culture. We see this e.g. when Lupe, somewhat condescendingly, makes fun of Flavio for not dressing like she thinks a Mexican should dress: "What *you* are, sweetheart, is a product of American imperialism," and he counters with, "I don't have to dress in a sarape and sombrero to be Mexican. ... I *know* who *I* am" (151). At first, she gets hurt and angry that he has discovered her insecurity and questions her belonging to Chicano/Mexican culture, but in the end she has to admit to herself that "I wanted to *be* Mexican at that moment, but it was true. I was not Mexican" (151-52). Confronted by Flavio's self-confidence, Lupe's own unstable ties to the Mexican culture is revealed. As Mullen puts it in her essay "The Untranslatability of Experience in Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek*," Flavio "gently challenges the *self-conscious* Chicanismo of the narrator, Guadalupe (Lupe/Lupita), a new age bohemian artist" (13, emphasis mine). Another episode that illustrates this is when Flavio is talking about the dances his grandmother taught him and Lupe asks, "Don't you know any indigenous dances? ... like *el baile de los viejitos*?" Flavio rolled his eyes. That was the end of our dance lesson" (151).

Flavio's comment on serapes would probably have offended Rodriguez's serape-wearing academics as well (26). The minority students clearly wear serapes in order to make a statement; to associate themselves with a culture they may feel they have lost, or are losing. They make a conscious effort to belong; to set themselves

apart from those who do *not* belong, from “the others.” We see a similar attitude in a remark that Lupe makes: “Over dinner I talked about ... whether a white woman had any *right* to claim to be an Indian shamaness” (150, emphasis mine). One of the main indications of Flavio’s Mexicanness seems to be his language. Lupe has spoken Spanish with her boyfriends before, but none of them were “proper” Mexicans, or native Spanish speakers. One, crazy Graham, “was Welsh and had learned his Spanish running guns to Bolivia,” and naturally cannot be considered a real Spanish speaker (153). Her last boyfriend Eddie was, like herself, removed from the language and culture by education: “Eddie and I were both products of our American education” (153). Flavio however, is what Lupe might characterise as a genuine Spanish speaker: “When Flavio accidentally hammered his thumb, he never yelled ‘Ouch!’ he said ‘¡Ay!’ The true test of a native Spanish speaker” (153). This remark implies that there are, at least to Lupe, “authentic” Spanish speakers and “unauthentic” Spanish speakers. The reason why this is so important to her might be that she, like Rodriguez, feels separated from her “roots” by education and the English language, and she, like the narrator of “Tepeyac,” seems to view the Spanish language as a key to the Mexican culture and a means to reconnect with it.

When Flavio leaves her, Lupe is initially heartbroken and tries different approaches in order to mend her heart. First she performs a sort of cleansing ritual, burning copal and sage “to purify the house” (155). When this does not work, she tries to get rid of Flavio mentally by disposing of everything that reminds her of him, and burns all his poems and letters and the sketches she made of him – the Weber kettle in the backyard smokes for three days before it is all gone: “it was a lot of layers” (161). She then shuts out the outside world and takes refuge in *telenovelas* and tv-dinners to get away from her own life and to keep her from thinking about Flavio.

However, unlike Cleófilas and the girl in “Holy Night” who take on the philosophy of the *telenovelas* uncritically and accept the world of the soap operas as reality, Lupe does not recognise the women she sees on tv. She challenges their passive nature and has her own little confrontation with the *telenovela* heroines: “in my dreams I’m slapping the heroine to her senses, because I want them to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to ... Real women ... The ones I’ve known everywhere except on TV, in books and magazines. *Las girlfriends*” (161). As a final act of emancipation Lupe repaints her volcano painting. She initially intended Flavio as the myth’s Prince Popocatépetl leaning over a sleeping Princess Ixtaccíhuatl, but now she swaps the roles: “After all, who’s to say the sleeping mountain isn’t the prince, and the voyeur the princess, right? So I’ve done it my way. With Prince Popocatépetl lying on his back instead of the Princess” (163). Lupe starts and ends the story of her love affair with Flavio commenting on how she is not “pretty” anymore: “Everything’s like it was. Except for this. When I look in the mirror, I’m ugly. How come I never noticed before?” (160). Flavio “wore all [her] prettiness away” (137); he has rocked her confidence in her own identity and, as Mullen puts it, “she feels her own inauthenticity, or rather her cultural hybridity” (16). She feels “ugly” because she is not like him; less Mexican; “bleached,” in Rodriguez’s words (23).

Returning to the narrator of “Tepeyac” and her removal from Mexico, we can see in Lupe a similar desire to return to Mexican culture. The two stories can consequently be read as the first and last phase of a rite of passage: “Tepeyac” represents the protagonist’s separation from the parents and the parent culture, while in “*Bien*” Lupe tries to return to this: “Like the *I Ching* says, returning to one’s roots is returning to one’s destiny” (149). However, the final part of the last stage is not entirely completed – Lupe does not manage to successfully (re)integrate herself into



Chicano/Mexican culture. On the one hand, she does not see herself as an American, but her confrontation with Flavio forces her to realize that “[she] was not Mexican,” and when the story, and the book, ends, she has still not found a way to deal with her cultural hybridity.

## **THE SATELLITE STORIES**

“Salvador” is the most marginal story in the first section of the composite because of its poetic structure, and that it is more serious than the other childhood stories. In the third part of the book there are two such stories that stand out: “Tin Tan Tan” is distinguished from the others by its form and tone; “Zapata” stands out because unlike all the others, it is set in the past and populated by actual historical people.

### **“Salvador Late or Early”**

“Salvador Late or Early” is the most marginal story of the first section. It is the shortest in the book, only one page, and is not really a story at all. The text is more like a character portrait, as it describes a boy named Salvador and his daily activities. The piece can also be read as a prose poem: it is divided into three paragraphs that all start with the name of the boy, “Salvador,” and each one describes another side of him. Most of the sentences are incomplete, and repetition of words like his name, and “inside,” gives the text a rhythm: “Salvador inside that wrinkled shirt, inside the throat that must clear itself and apologize each time it speaks, inside that forty-pound body of boy with its geography of scars” (10).

The description of Salvador with “limbs stuffed with feathers and rags” (11) brings to mind a scarecrow. He is also described as someone “whose name the teacher cannot remember, a boy who is no one’s friend” (10), and it does not seem like the narrator, or speaker, knows him either. The boy is described as if from a distance, and he exists on the fringes of some unspoken “centre,” where the narrator is. He “arrives” from someplace else, and later he “runs along somewhere in that vague direction where homes are the color of bad weather” (10), to a place the speaker knows little about.

The marginality of the boy reflects the text’s peripheral position in the composite: “Salvador” stands out as the most serious and disturbing of all the childhood stories of the first section. The boy takes care of his younger brothers and is forced to grow up too soon; he has reached the adult stage much too early. The text feels sad, almost hopeless, in contrast to the mainly unworried stories about Mexican movies and Barbie-dolls. Expressions like “today, like yesterday,” and “late or early, sooner or later” (10) create a feeling of monotony, or inescapability, and so does the fact that all the verbs are in the present tense. One gets the sense that this is something that always happens, that it is almost a characteristic of the boy’s: he “shakes the sleepy brothers awake, ties their shoes, combs their hair with water, feeds them milk and corn flakes from a tin cup in the dim dark of the morning” (10).

Salvador disappears from the text in the same way that he vanishes from the sight of the speaker after school: he “Grows small and smaller to the eye, dissolves into the bright horizon, flutters in the air before disappearing like a memory of kites” (11), as if he was just a memory himself – or someone you rarely think about.

## “Tin Tan Tan”

“Tin Tan Tan,” is the only text written explicitly in the form of a poem. It is divided into six verses, and the first letter of each verse combined spell the name Lupita. The poem is a declaration of love and longing from someone calling himself Rogelio Velasco to his Lupita. In addition to the organisation, the tone is different. It stands out with a sentimental language that none of the other stories have, and it also rhymes occasionally: “But now that you have yanked my golden dreams from me, I shiver from this chalice of pain like a tender white flower tossed in rain” (135). However, when we read “*Bien*,” the story directly following “Tin Tan Tan,” we understand that Rogelio Velasco is Lupe’s boyfriend, the cockroach exterminator Flavio Munguía: “Flavio. He wrote poems and signed them ‘Rogelio Velasco’” (138). There are other indicators as well that Flavio and Rogelio are the same man. In “*Bien*” the narrator describes him spraying her kitchen, “the leather utility belt slung loose around your hips” (143), and in the poem we read, “I arrived innocently at your door. Dressed in my uniform and carrying the tools of my trade. ... Perhaps I can exterminate the pests of doubt that infest your house” (136).

We do not know where “Tin Tan Tan” figures in the chronology of these two texts. It may be the one poem Lupe saves from her post-breakup cleansing ritual or, maybe more probable, it is written after their relationship ends. The passionate and sentimental tone of “Tin Tan Tan” might indicate that it was originally written in Spanish. The grand words and metaphors are difficult to translate faithfully and feel almost pompous in English. In “*Bien*” Lupe claims that Flavio’s poems are “Pretty in Spanish. But you’ll have to take my word for it. In English it just sounds goofy” (161). To Lupe, they are untranslatable, something that cannot be brought from one culture,

or language, into another, and it seems improbable that she would translate one into English.

Regardless of where the poem comes from, these two texts are the only ones where we get the same story from two points of view. This creates a dialogue between the poem and “*Bien*,” between the points of view of Flavio and Lupe; between the unschooled poet and the educated painter. These are also the only texts in the composite that obviously share the same characters, and the fact that “Tin Tan Tan” is directly linked to a story that figures in all three of the core story sets makes it improbable that it should be the fringe story of the composite. In addition, other texts, like “Salvador” as previously discussed, can also be read as poems even though they are not that clearly structured as poems. “Tin Tan Tan” and “Salvador” are both marginal stories, or what Lundén calls satellites. They exist in the periphery of the composite. However, they still have several connections to the rest of the stories and are not tangential enough to be *the* fringe story.

### **“Eyes of Zapata”**

The story that is most unlike the others, and which I will argue is *the* fringe story of the book, is “Eyes of Zapata.” Like the story “Godliness” in Anderson’s *Winesburg*,<sup>15</sup> “Zapata” sticks out by being the longest story in the book. There are several other elements that disconnect it from the others as well. The narrator of “Zapata” is Inés Alfaro, mistress to Emiliano Zapata, and mother of two of his children. This is the only story in the composite that is populated by actual historical people and relates real events. It is also the only one that is undoubtedly set in the past – the other stories

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<sup>15</sup> Lundén discusses this story as a fringe story in chapter 6, “The Fringe Story – Or, How to Integrate the Resisting Text,” in his book *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite*. “Godliness” is the longest story in *Winesburg, Ohio*, but it is still marginal.

all seemingly describe contemporary life. However, as a fringe story it is not completely detached from the others in the book. It still has a place in the composite and there are links that connect it to the other texts.

The story of “Zapata” is Inés’s, and she tells it to her Miliano one night while he is asleep. She tells him about the life she and their two children, Nicolás and Malena, lead when he is not there, when he is off being the general: “Miliano, what I’m about to say to you now, only to you do I tell it, to no one else have I confessed it” (104). She talks about what they have had to do to survive, to find food, hide in the hills from the *federales*. However, it is an internal monologue with no audience; he is asleep and does not hear her. It seems like she wants him to know, but does not want to disturb him because he has more important matters to think about; what she has to say is not significant compared to the concerns of the general. This links her to both Patricia in “*Tocaya*,” who feels ignored and overlooked, and to Chayo in “Little Miracles,” whose thoughts and opinions are not taken seriously because she is a woman. These women are all in possession of devalued knowledge and offer what Brady calls alternative epistemologies. “Zapata” shows a side of historical events (although probably not entirely accurate) not included in history books; the story from the point of view of “normal,” non-military people.

Watching her lover, Inés says that “when you are gone I re-create you from memory ... I miss you even now as you lie next to me” (88). This suggests that it is not really him she wants, but what she imagines him to be, or wants him to be. She “recreates” him in her mind to a point where it is not even enough for her to have him beside her. Similarly, Lupe in “*Bien*” also has certain notions about her man that he cannot not live up to.

After watching Emiliano sleep and thinking about how the war has changed them, Inés flies off in the form of an owl, circles the village and watches over her man and her children. Her soul leaves her body for a while until she returns to the bedroom where Emiliano is sleeping: “I slow-circle and glide into the house, bringing the night-wind smell with me, fold myself back into my body” (88). This element of witchcraft is also present when Inés talks about her aunt, and her mother who was killed for being a witch: “The women in my family, we’ve always had the power to see with more than our eyes. My mother, my Tia Chucha, me. Our Malenita as well” (105). This magic aspect is something that is not as evident in any other story, but it does exist in the background. Clemencia in “Never Marry” performs “Mexican voodoo” when she hides gummy bears in her rival’s make up (81). The girl in “Holy Night” is treated by a “wrinkled witch woman who rubs [her] belly with jade” (27). In order to cure her heartache, Lupe in “*Bien*” goes to a “Mexican voodoo shop” where religious items and “Magic oils, magic perfume and soaps” occupy different sides of the shop (158-59).<sup>16</sup> The recurrence of these alternative religious traditions, and their juxtaposition to Catholic religious symbols and practices, also suggest the value of “alternative epistemologies” and different ways of thinking.

The story ends as it begins, with Inés watching Emiliano sleep and then flying off as an owl. The story starts when he has just fallen asleep and ends just before he wakes up. During the night she has told him her story and he has not heard a word of it. At the end, flying in the form of the owl over the village, she sees her own death, her mother’s death, and the future of her children. The past, present and future are all open to her.

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<sup>16</sup> This also echoes the two sets of religious traditions practiced in “Holy Night.”

## **THE ANCHOR STORY: “*Bien Pretty*”**

One feature of the short story composite that has not been discussed is the anchor story. Lundén describes this as the most dominant core story in the book. It is often longer than the other stories, and it is commonly located in the middle or at the end of the composite. The story that stands out in *Woman Hollering* is “*Bien*,” which together with the fringe story “*Zapata*” is the longest in the book with its 29 pages. It is the very last text of the composite, and it appears in all three of the core story sets, which indicates that this story holds special significance. In addition to bringing a conclusion, albeit an open-ended one, to the rite of passage stories, it also rehearses several elements that might have been mentioned in asides in previous stories: like the children in “*Mexican Movies*,” Lupe watches Pedro Infante “singing on a horse” (161). The same place where Lupe buys her “powders,” “*Casa Preciado Religious Articles*, the Mexican voodoo shop on South Laredo” (158), is also mentioned by the speaker in “*Anguiano*.” Lupe buys a romance novel by Corín Tellado, the author of the book *Cleófilas*’s husband throws at her (52, 162). Lupe also shares the setting, San Antonio, with several of the inhabitants of other stories, for example “*Tocaya*” and “*Remember the Alamo*.” This pointing back to preceding stories gives the composite a cyclical feel, and it ties the stories together. Use of the same cultural and religious references makes it clear that the characters inhabit the same space and belong to the same cultural context.





## CHAPTER III

With the analyses of the individual stories in mind, we can now look at how the stories figure together and how a reading of *Woman Hollering Creek* as a bildungscomposite adds to our understanding of the text as a whole, and the space it speaks to and from. As previously mentioned, the three core story strings traverse and complicate the tripartite division. At the beginning of the previous chapter I suggested three thematic labels for the three trajectories – individual identity, collective identity, and rite of passage – and I will now discuss these three ways of reading the book, before I look at how the *Bildungsroman* genre is developing in new directions.

### **Individual identity: the Chicana artist**

Identity is closely linked to cultural identity. When the protagonist in “Tepeyac” moves from Mexico to the U.S. she loses touch with the culture that has shaped the first part of her life and that she has come to identify with. She refers to the U.S. as “that borrowed country,” which indicates that she never really feels at home there; that she never feels she belongs (23). However, when she returns to Mexico, the city where she grew up has changed and she does not recognise it as the place where she lived as a child. This story reflects what Wyatt, in relation to “Never Marry,” calls a “double unbelonging” (246), the opposite of the ideal Mestiza state that Anzaldúa describes. If one is unable to straddle the border and inhabit both countries and cultures at the same time, one can end up trapped between them, incapable of identifying with either.

Clemencia in “Never Marry” also struggles with identity, and in some ways she is caught between cultures as well. She identifies with Anglo-American culture

and dissociates from Mexico by heeding her mother's advice to "never marry a Mexican." However, she is unable to see that she herself gets put into that category by her lover, Drew, when he says that "he could *never* marry [*her*]" (80). She also rebels against the identity society tries to impose on her as a woman. She reverses the gender roles, but in taking the role of the man she only replaces one pre-existing identity with another and is still defined externally by society.

Chayo in the second part of "Little Miracles" is more successful with her self-invention. She accomplishes what the girl in "Tepeyac" cannot, and is able to redefine the religious symbol of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* as someone she feels comfortable with. She borrows aspects from both Aztec, Mexican, and Anglo religions and creates her own deity rather than accepting unquestioningly the beliefs inherited from her family. In doing this, she achieves what Karafilis calls *métissage*, "to reconcile her Anglo-American and Mexican cultures" (65).

At the beginning of "*Bien*," Lupe is sure about who she is. However, when she meets Flavio, her self-proclaimed Mexicanness stands in contrast to his effortless and, to Lupe, "authentic" Mexicanness. This leaves her questioning her own cultural belonging, and forces her to reconsider her cultural identity.

In the last three stories the quest for identity is connected to the women's roles as artists. The act of creation is linked to the process of creating an identity and to the way the women see themselves in relation to the world around them. Two of the women consider themselves partly "outside" society, somehow separated from their immediate surroundings by the fact that they are artists. Clemencia sees herself as a "chameleon," moving between classes and groups of people, and Chayo's family disapprove of her choices that set her apart from them. However, the fact that they know they are meant to be artists makes them stronger and able to handle this partial

separation from the rest of their community, because they would not want it differently. As Chayo puts it, “I didn’t choose being artist – it isn’t something you choose. It’s something you are, only I can’t explain it” (127).

### **Collective identity: the New Mestiza**

As we have seen, when it comes to *Bildung*, Chicanas are faced with a double challenge: not only do they have to *find* their identity, but also *redefine* the identity that has been imposed on them by society. Eysturoy points out that,

a realistic representation of the female *Bildungs* process, which follows the traditional pattern of portraying individual accommodation to socio-cultural values and gender role expectations, can only portray a female *Bildungsheld* who succumbs to social and cultural norms of womanhood, norms that are antithetical to an autonomous and self-defined female identity. (29-30)

Women/Chicanas, having “found” an externally created definition of themselves as women/Chicanas, have to redefine this and shape their identity on their own terms, in accordance with how they see themselves. As Cisneros herself says in an interview with Pilar Aranda, ““We accept our culture, but not without adapting [it to] ourselves as women”” (quoted in Wyatt 267).

In the second set of core stories, the girl in “Holy Night” demonstrates the naïve, adolescent reaction to lost love. Her Chaq turns out to be someone else entirely than who she thought he was: his real name means “fat-face,” he comes from a town called Miseria (“misery”), and the newspaper reports that he was arrested for having killed eleven girls. However, even after learning the truth about him, the girl still claims to love him: “Then I couldn’t read but only stare at the black-and-white dots that make up the face I am in love with” (34). She has not learned to stay away from

men who are bad for her and probably thinks that if they had been allowed to be together, he would not have hurt her.

Cleófilas in “Woman Hollering” has come a step further. She does leave the man who is hurting her, but she needs her doctor to give her a push in the right direction. In the end, however, it is Cleófilas who makes the decision to leave.

Clemencia in “Never Marry” and Lupe in “*Bien*” share several similarities, and their stories almost run parallel up to a certain point: they both want to belong to another culture, and find this difficult. They choose lovers from “the other side” of the cultural divide; lovers who leave them in the end. However, while Clemencia becomes obsessed with her lost love and resorts to destructive strategies in order to get him back, if only indirectly through his son, Lupe is able to let it go through repainting the volcano-painting Flavio modelled for. Lupe’s inverting the parts of the Princess and the Prince echoes Clemencia’s switching roles, but Lupe’s inversion is only symbolic, a means to help her get over Flavio, and a more healthy way to deal with disappointment. In this string, “*Bien*” figures differently than in the first: now it is not Lupe’s cultural identity that is the focus, but her identity as a woman.

Taken together, these stories chronicle the emergence of the New Mestiza through four women’s reactions to being betrayed by men. We see how they become stronger, more independent and self-assertive, until Lupe finally emancipates herself from the hold her man has on her. She might have problems reconciling the Mexican and Anglo aspects of her cultural identity, but she is a New Mestiza, or “New Woman,” in that she lives for herself and does not *need* a man in her life (although she might choose to have one): “Everywhere I go, it’s me and me. Half of me living my life, the other half watching me live it” (163). She is completely present in her

own life, instead of living through the *telenovela* heroines or, perhaps worse, through a man.

### **Rite of passage**

As the first and second strings of core stories can be read as respectively the *Bildung* of individual and collective protagonists, the third string chronicles the rite of passage of the entire book. As previously mentioned, “Tepeyac” and “*Bien*” can be read as the first and last stage of a rite of passage, “Tepeyac” signifying the separation stage and “*Bien*” the attempted aggregation. The middle part of the rite of passage is represented by “Holy Night” and “*Tocaya*.” These two stories both demonstrate the uniformity and loss of identity that characterise the liminal stage. The girl in “Holy Night” “loses herself” and takes on a new identity in the transformation phase: “I gave out a cry as if the other, the one I wouldn’t be anymore, leapt out. ... I, Ixchel, his queen” (30). There is also a sense of darkness and claustrophobia about this part of the story. The girl’s initiation takes place at night, with the only source of light being “the pale moon with its one yellow eye” seen through a narrow window (30), and Chaq’s tiny room resembles, as previously discussed, a tomb. The association with death is even stronger in “*Tocaya*,” where Trish is assumed dead. What appears to be her body is found and identified, but it turns out to be a case of mistaken identity. This reflects the uniformity that, according to Turner, characterises the initiand in the liminal stage – even her parents cannot distinguish her from another girl.

The book’s rite of passage ending with Lupe’s attempted aggregation in the last story analogises the challenge that Chicanas/os face of trying to combine the different elements of their culture; an effort that is not always successful.

## Conclusion

As previously mentioned, genres are “subject to historical change and modification” (Børtnes 197), and each new text written within a genre has the possibilities of slightly altering the signification of the genre. We have seen that the *Bildungsroman* has undergone a development which in the Chicana *Bildungsroman*, as Cisneros’s revisions of the genre demonstrate, includes a shift from the traditional focus on the individual to the communal, and from a linear, chronologic organisation to a more episodic structure. In addition, since its “birth” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Bildungsroman* has moved away from the notion that a synthesis between society and the individual is possible. The aggregation of the traditional *Bildungsroman* required a unified society in which the protagonist could find his place in the end. Today’s societies are much more complex, and this holds especially true for communities such as the Chicano, which incorporates Anglo, Mexican and indigenous cultures from both sides of the border. With such a complicated cultural backdrop another approach to *Bildung* is needed, and this is what *Woman Hollering* illustrates.

In *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman*, Wangari wa Nyatetū-Waigwa says that “Reincorporation or assimilation into society assumes the existence of a community to which the protagonist can return, one that has maintained enough cultural continuity to allow a clear definition or sense of the individual’s place within the group” (15). This is why the Chicana/o *Bildungsroman* needs to end differently, and possibly why we see increasingly more examples of the “often indeterminate endings of the modern *Bildungsroman*” (Eysturoy 10); that is, “incomplete,” or open-ended *Bildungsromane* that do not offer an “orderly” conclusion to the *Bildungs* process.

Karafilis suggests that “the condition for success in ... twentieth-century *Bildungsromane* by women of color” is what she calls *métissage*, that is, in the case of Chicanas, the protagonist’s ability to reconcile the Mexican and Anglo aspects of her culture (65). If we agree with Karafilis, *Woman Hollering*’s composite protagonist is “unsuccessful.” Lupe in “*Bien*” concludes the book, and as an individual protagonist, part of a composite protagonist, and as representing the last stage of the book’s rite of passage, she fails at achieving *métissage*. She tries to straddle the border and keep one foot in each culture, but is pushed over to the Anglo side when she has to admit that “[she] was not Mexican.” Does this mean that *Woman Hollering* is not a *Bildungs* text? I do not think so. Karafilis discusses the *Bildungsroman* genre in traditional terms: she still assumes that it needs to end with some sort of fusion, or reconciliation. However, I think we need to look at the genre in new terms, which I will come back to shortly.

The reason for the complex cultural situation of the borderland is *transculturation*, a concept that was formulated in the 1940s by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. He defines it as “the process of transition from one culture to another,” which involves different phases:

“it does not only consist in acquiring a culture, which is what the Anglo-American word *acculturation* really means, but the process also necessarily implies the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be called a partial deculturation, and, in addition, it indicates the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena which could be called *neoculturation*.” (Ortiz quoted in Millington 209)

Two cultures come together and form a third, a border culture in its own right, not identical with either of the two countries, but possessing elements of both.

Transculturation is not limited to Chicano experience, however. It happens wherever cultures meet and interact, and is in this way characteristic of contemporary life.

Recently Richard Rodriguez has addressed this aspect in more general terms,

suggesting that “The experience of the modern is exactly the experience of confusion and the intersection of many cultures in a single life” (“Amerikas Historier” 22).<sup>17</sup>

Transculturation creates new cultures, realities and experiences, which call for new approaches to literature, and questions are being raised about the novel’s ability to represent the complexity and communal nature of for instance Chicano culture. Rodriguez claims that the novel “is not a form capable of being true to the basic sense of communal life that typifies Chicano culture. What the novel as a literary form is best capable of representing is solitary existence set against a large social background” (“Going Home” 27). He also states that modernity “calls for a non-linear response” in literature (“Amerikas Historier” 22), which is precisely what the composite offers, and why I believe that the composite structure is more suited for representing diverse and heterogeneous communities like the Chicanas/os. David Attwell argues that the term transculturation “suggests multiple processes, a dialogue in both directions and, most importantly, processes of cultural destruction followed by reconstruction on entirely new terms” (18). Following this definition, what I have called the bildungscomposite can be regarded as literary transculturation: the conditions of the *Bildungsroman* is, through revisions and new articulations of the genre, being “[reconstructed] on entirely new terms.”

To conclude, I believe that *Bildungs* texts can no longer end with the traditional synthesis between individual and society, or between cultures as Karafilis suggests. We need to acknowledge that such reconciliation is not always possible and instead accept open-ended texts as members of the *Bildungsroman* tradition.

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<sup>17</sup> All quotations from this interview are from the original English version of the interview.



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