

Banned in Arizona: Dark Gifts, Taboos, Secrets and Transformations in Chicana Literature

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As many of you know, last year the Tucson Unified School District decided to eliminate Mexican American Studies and banned or took off the shelves and out of the classrooms books used to teach those classes. One of the books taken off the shelves was an anthology of Chicana Literature that Dr. Eliana Rivero, Profe emerita of the University of Arizona, and I put together in 1993, *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, ironically enough, published by the University of Arizona Press. This book was one of the first to collect Chicana writers in one comprehensive volume and also to establish some sort of social, cultural and historical context for this important literature. It has been widely used in high school and university classrooms. Clearly both Eliana and I were dismayed to hear that the book had been taken out of the classroom and at the same time elated to know that we had actually produced subversive (to the school board) literature. However, as I pondered this extraordinary measure, I tried to understand what our anthology (as well as the other books that were taken out of the classroom) contained that was so dangerous, so subversive that teachers in high school were not allowed to teach the material in them. Clearly, if one reviews the literature about banned books there are some recurring issues that seem to surface time and time again as inappropriate information for young minds to receive: information about a religion that is not yours, sex, witches and magic, politics and even in one book, disrespect to parents and teachers. Anything that falls outside of conventional, read dominant, information. It is as if all these things threaten our nation. As we all know, and as many people pointed out with this incident, barring knowledge and banning books is an incidious action which often backfires, leading more people to read the book. There is no publicity like bad publicity.

In 1981, a state senator in New Mexico testified that she had personally seen to it that copies of *Bless Me Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya were taken out of the high school district in Bloomfield, New Mexico and burned. As Anaya wrote, "The burning of my novel wasn't an isolated example. Every Chicano community in this country has a story of murals being attacked or erased, poets banned from schools, books being inaccessible to our students because they are systematically kept out of the accepted textbooks list. We know there are well-organized, well-funded groups in this country that threaten publishers, if the editors publish the work of multicul-

tural writers. The threat is simple but often persuasive" (71). Since that time, Anaya has written several essays against censorship, "Take the Tortillas Out of Your Poetry," "The Censorship of Neglect", and "The Courage of Expression." In the first essay, "Take the Tortillas Out of Your Poetry," Anaya recounts a conversation with a friend, a Chicano Poet writing bilingually, who had been turned down time after time for fellowships and who had concluded that he would only send his poems in English, not his best ones, to the panelists. Shocked, Anaya realized that his friend had decided that if he took his language and culture out of his poetry, he had a better chance of receiving a fellowship. Anaya went on to say, "He took out his native language, the poetic patois of our reality, the rich mixture of Spanish, English, pachuco and street talk that we know so well. In other words, he took the tortillas out of his poetry, which is to say he took the soul out of his poetry" (68). Anaya also examines different types of censorship beyond the actual banning of books and classes, such as the censorship of neglect, which many ethnic minority groups have suffered. Books are not banned, they are simply not published by mainstream publishers, Chicano and Chicana authors are not awarded major prizes and minority students do not see themselves reflected in contemporary culture and history. As Anaya argues in "The Courage of Expression," "Politically or religiously motivated groups that try to exclude the literature of any individual or group of people from the classroom also seek to stifle new and challenging thought. And history teaches us that when one group controls the thought of a people, that nation is bound to die a self-inflicted death" (80). Later he writes, "In striking out, they sought to silence me, to burn images which presented another way of

perceiving the truth. In a multicultural society the rights of all the voices need to be respected. If we live and work in a multicultural world, then our own cultural groups have something to teach us about the bigger world. You cannot burn the books of one group and expect democracy to work" (85).

Today I want to examine what there is in *Infinite Divisions* and in the other books taken out of the classroom as well as in Chicana literature that is so dangerous, so subversive as to undermine our communities, even our nation. This literature represents threats in the form of language, sex, religion, witchcraft and dark gifts, taboos and voice. And I will try and tie these issues to the transitions that have occurred in Chicana literature during the last 40 years or so.

Language

Gloria Anzaldúa's often repeated phrase "I am my language" remains as true today as it was when she wrote it. That is, that the languages we speak form a part of our personal and cultural identity. When the languages of our communities and of our forefathers and mothers are denied us, part of our identity is also denied. This is one of the central challenges facing the heritage speaker today, particularly in a country when often heritage speakers are considered to be outsiders, their languages denigrated, ridiculed and erased. "Deslenguadas" is the term Anzaldúa uses.

Chicana writers have long articulated the effects of language denial on their lives. As early as the 1970s, Lorna Dee Cervantes pictured her inability to speak Spanish as a boat that would never arrive. She writes, "Mama raised me without language./I'm orphaned from my Spanish name./The words are foreign, stumbling on my tongue. . ./I feel I am a cap-

tive/aboard the refugee ship. /The ship that will never dock. El barco que nunca atracará". (Rebolledo and Rivera, 293). In another poem, while in Mexico, she comments on her inability to speak "in words of another language." She tells us, "I didn't ask to be brought up tonta! / My name hangs about me like a loose tooth" (Rebolledo and Rivera 90). Marked by the color of her skin but unable to communicate she cannot connect with her heritage. Judged by Americans as not looking American and by Mexicans for not speaking Spanish, she is in that shifting space between. Pat Mora explains this discomfort, in her poem "Legal Alien":

American but hyphenated
viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic,
perhaps inferior, definitely different,
viewed by Mexicans as alien,
(Their eyes say, "You may speak
Spanish but you're not like me")
an American to Mexicans
A Mexican to Americans
a handy token
sliding back and forth
between the fringes of both worlds
by smiling
by masking the discomfort
of being pre-judged
Bi-laterally. (Rebolledo and Rivera, 95)

Demetria Martínez takes up the same issues in *Confessions of a Berlitz-Tape Chicana*. She tells us, "We're everywhere, and it's time to come out of the closet: I speak of the tongue-tied generation, buyers of books with titles like *Master Spanish in Ten Minutes a Day While you Nap*. We're the Chicanas with cassettes in our glove compartments; commuting to work..." (43). She acknowledges that she lives in occupied Mexico where older family and relatives speak "a thick and sweet Spanish, marbled with English," but the younger generation is unable to speak in their heritage

language. She says, "We grew up listening to the language—usually in the kitchens of extended family—but we answered mostly in English. We refer to our "broken" Spanish as if it were a broken bone and speak of how, when we least expect it the language "comes back" as if it were a preexisting condition. We are ashamed, for something precious shattered under our watch" (43-44). She explains how over the years she struggled to learn Spanish, yearning to be "fluent," but she began to understand "the privilege heaped upon those who can wield English like a sword" (45). She felt guilty because she was tongue-tied. As she says, "Guilt crops up when we tell ourselves: I'm Latina, I should be fluent. Shame follows when we're around the fluent and afraid to speak up. So powerful are these emotions that it does no good to know that much in our history has conspired against fluency. English Only movements being but one especially virulent manifestation. Who hasn't heard a story, recalled by elders or even contemporaries, of punishments meted out for speaking Spanish in school, from mouths washed out with soap to placement of Spanish speakers in classes for the mentally handicapped?" (47). Lorna Dee Cervantes also comments on these sentiments when she writes, "Let me show you my wounds: my stumbling mind, my 'excuse me' tongue, and this nagging preoccupation/ with the feeling of not being good enough" (Rebolledo and Rivera, 287).

Thus the overwhelming emotion of not being to speak up, or not being able to do it fluently, powerfully, being tonta and tongue-tied, speaking with a mocho, excuse me tongue, nags at us constantly. Not being good enough in the language may mean not being good enough as a person. As many Spanish speakers sought to become articulate in English in order to wield the sword, or to navigate

complex institutions, so too must we encourage heritage language speakers to be proud of the language they have struggled to maintain and to use it as a creative resistance to erasure and denigration. And this is where critical race theory comes in.

Critical race theory is an approach arising from legal studies which analyzes racism, classism, sexism and homophobia from a historical and interdisciplinary perspective (Yosso, *Critical Race* 8). It analyzes how these forms of subordination shape the Chicana/o educational pipeline, how educational institutional practices maintain discrimination, how Chicanas/os respond to and resist discrimination and how education can become a tool to help end these forms of subordination. The representations of language discrimination and sentiments of inadequacy towards and from heritage language speakers articulate what critic Tara Yosso calls "the deficit model". That is that white privilege and majority storytelling are seen as the central focus of society: they have "cultural capital". It is central, true, right, powerful and important. Aspects of minority culture are then seen as outside the center. The question here is whose experience counts and whose is discounted. Who is visible and who is invisible? (69). This concept is artfully captured in Margarita Cota-Cárdenas's poem "Watercolors": "Could all the blue eyes/of the world fit into Lake Mead? The brownness is contained/neatly at the edges" (Marchitas, 45).

So then, finding language is one element of danger, of subversion And the struggles, successes and transitions for language are clearly evident in Chicano/a literature.

Dark gifts

In many novels, Chicana writers have as a central character a curandera, or clairvoy-

ant, who comes to understand things or see reality in dreams. My own Mexican grandmother, Concepción "Concha" Galindo Vernon, was a clairvoyant, a claravidente. She scared the hell out of me when I was a child. Dressed all in black, chaparita, her gray/white long hair tied in a braid and then twisted around her head, doña Concepción always knew when someone in the neighborhood had died. They would come to visit her in the night to say their farewells: "Doña Concha, doña Concha, me voy, adiós, adiosito". "Que te vaya bien, mijito, mijita," she would tell them. In the morning, when she awoke, she would send someone to the difuntito's house. "Andrés, vete a la casa de Joaquín Chávez, y deles mi pésame, don Joaquín murió anoche". And the don Joaquín's of the neighborhood had always died, mi abuela was never wrong. Spooky indeed to sit around the dinner table with the family while they spoke of these things. My mother too had visions on occasions. Once, as a newlywed in Mexico, she was living in a two story house where it was said the previous owner had died. She paused on the dimly lit stairway and felt a hand caressing her, thinking it was her husband she turned around, but no one was there. When telling this story, my mother almost always emphasized the way she felt when the hand touched her--cold, icy cold. I too have had some strange experiences, backed by dreams. Once, when I was a graduate student at the University of New Mexico, I had a dream about two friends, María and Luis, who had moved to the East Coast. In my dream I saw María in Bloomingdales in New York City and asked her where Luis was. "He went away," she told me, but she had a strange look on her face. The next day I received a call from mutual friends telling me that Luis had died that night in a car accident. Frankly,

these kinds of visions are not what one wants to have: they lead to dark places we don't even want to contemplate. Once, my sister, who shared these family stories, called me to say that she dreamed a favorite uncle had died. "I can't bear to call them," she said, "You call." So with much trepidation I called and our Uncle answered the phone. "You don't have the gift," I told her. Her reply was, "Thank God."

In Lucha Corpi's detective stories featuring Gloria Damasco, *Cactus Blood* (1995), *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), and *Black Widow's Wardrobe* (1999), and her latest, *Death at Solstice*, 2009, Gloria has visionary nightmares in which she sees terrible things happening. In one she dreams about a woman, the Black Widow, who was accused of killing her husband.

Not day anymore, not yet night, it is the hour of the wild cat, the ocelot. A woman fans the fire in a stone stove. She wears a mid-length skirt underneath a huipil with embroidered red flowers. Her long hair streams down her back. Her back is to me and I cannot see her face. Her young daughter plays by her side. A brooding young man sits at the kitchen table, playing with a dagger, a gift from his father. Suddenly, without saying a word, he gets up, picks up the dagger, and walks toward the woman at the stove. He raises his hand. She turns. The fire flares up, and her hair catches on fire, then her clothes. The kitchen fills with the stink of searing flesh and hair. Terrified, I do nothing to help her. I watch her burn until there is nothing but a pile of smoking bones. I flee into the darkness, and run and run until I can go no more (*Black Widow*, iii).

This gruesome dream is the mechanism that drives the story and this particular nightmare repeats itself over and over again in Gloria's dreams. In *Cactus Blood*, a similar device

triggers the story and provides clues to the plot. In this narrative, Gloria has a dream about a woman crucified on a cactus, with rattlesnakes surrounding her, and she tells us;

I was twenty-three when I'd first discovered I had an extrasensory awareness--my dark gift. Since then, I had known that I had no more control over its rhythms than I had over my heart's beating. Nonetheless, I had relentlessly fought not to have my reason clouded by this prescience in me. But I also realized that regardless of how I felt about my heightened perception, once the dreams and visions came I would be committed--like an unskilled cryptographer--to extract meaning from them and to act on the knowledge. (32)

She tells us, "My dark gift was a mixed blessing at best, but it was a part of me, a part my reason always tried to deny or control" (10).

The detective continues having different visions related to her cases until the case is more or less solved. She recognizes a different world distinguishes her from other people. She experiences multiple levels of clairvoyancy, levels which she fears and welcomes at the same time. As a child, she tells us,

I used to sit in the dark . . .daring the devil and other creatures of the night to come get me. Nothing compared to that thrill--the rush of fear through my veins at the softest creaking or the dimmest shadow, my heart at full gallop, every hair on my body standing straight up. To cover all bases, every so often I would say a Hail Mary. Then, when neither the devil nor any other creature showed up, I'd get an incredible feeling, a mixture of anger and pleasure. Even at that early age I knew that courage was made of those feelings--the "dark gifts" I called them. (50)

Clearly, dark gifts lead to some kind of un-

derstanding of the multiple levels of reality we live through. They not only allow her to solve the mysteries, but also to "see" the problems of society in a way that leads to action. And it is in part these gifts, the magic or a certain kind of truth, which function outside of the realms of what is understood to be reality that cause books to be banned.

Silences

Breaking the silences we are taught to live with is a difficult thing for Chicana writers. There is a family code which tells us not to speak outside of the family things that occur within the family. And often one cannot speak about them within the family either. Lucha Corpi is extremely graphic when she describes the situation many Chicanas face. When Delia, the central character of Corpi's novel, *Delia's Song*, finally begins to write her silences, she reads the words aloud "as if, in doing so, she could exorcize the power that held her prisoner and could liberate herself by restoring the order she had upset" (115). But then, she began writing in order to get at the root cause of her nightmares, horrible dreams she has been experiencing for two years. The one that bothers her most is when she dreams about a man cutting off her tongue:

Weird. It was the most terrifying--its blinding light and sacrificial ritual. . . .I couldn't begin to describe the horror of it all. This time it was clearly a man, and he sliced my tongue. Who is he? Why did I have to be punished? What frightens me most is that I didn't fight him. I let him maim me. He took away my tongue. My tongue! The very instrument of voice" (*Delia's Song*, (127).

Delia discovers that the cause of the nightmares is an abusive relationship with a man who constantly puts her down and di-

minishes her self-esteem. When he becomes physically abusive, she turns to defend herself, picking up the first heavy object she can find, an unabridged dictionary of the Spanish language. Whereas before she had internalized silence and passive behavior, now she tells us she discovers that she had allowed herself to be silenced: she herself had symbolically sliced her own tongue. She discovers that in fighting back, in writing down her nightmares and fears she is able to find her voice. She tells us, "I have feared you so, Silence, my oldest enemy, my dearest friend. I surrendered my tongue to you once, freely, and I learned your secret. I learned to write" (150). This is pictured in Pola López's "Inner Scream." as she states, "this is the portrait that shows a self-imposed silence as I cover my mouth, but an inner scream given by my self as a child, is a suppressed thought" (11).

Many other Chicana writers have had to struggle to break the cultural bonds that silence their voices, and one finds similar descriptions in their work.

Family Secrets

In Margarita Cota-Cárdenas's *Sanctuaries of the Heart* (2005), the entire second section is titled "Memories and Secrets: The Taboo Stories" and, believe me, she tells them all. In fact, one wants to continue reading the novel just to see what else she will dare say. And when she says it, we respond with recognition, sometimes with sadness, sometimes with laughter. Petra is the narrator of the stories, and from her we discover that her father has another woman, "la vieja, esa pendeja" as she is known in the family. When the father leaves with "la otra," Petra and her mother have to sell the house and the business because her mother was left behind with all the debt.

The young Petra and her mother meet with the lawyers, and Petra's mother

teary-eyed, looks at me and asks, "What do you think...? and I am the one that, at that moment so impressed by the fact that I was the one they invited to observe these proceedings and always a bit confused by the business dealings of the grown-up world, answer in English, something like, "The amount being offered for the labor camp is quite COM-parable to ...". And I answered my stupid answers to impress the lawyer/accountant with my English pronunciation of 'comparable' and that's how, I, being the older at fifteen, helped them to steal my mother's business (73).

It is a secret, a verguena, a shame, that Petra will carry with her for the rest of her life.

We discover that every family member has their secrets: the male cousins abuse their much younger female cousins; many young women get pregnant in their early teens and have abortions. They drink too much, they are gay, they have AIDs. And as always the victims are told to be quiet. Cota-Cárdenas tells us, "But what I really need, want to talk about now, are the things that they told me not to talk about. Yeah, what someone or somebody told me, "Don't tell anybody. . . Don't say anything. . . Because if you do, something will happen. . . to you, to somebody . . . Don't tell your mom, your dad. . . nobody... " (32). "Es nuestro secreto". (Many of these secrets, but not all, are about sex, since talking about sexuality was certainly a taboo. One way to approach these issues is with humor. For example, Cota-Cárdenas tells us about one of Petra's first sexual encounters; "She went with her boyfriend and another couple to the "toolies," the woods, where people could go to neck, the "same place where young men would loose control and the young girls "would let them-

selves go, would loose their virtue. . .etc., the men took advantage of them, etc."

We laid down on a blanket that the very well prepared young man, el chavalo, had brought. . .Well, kiss leads to kiss, and squeeze to squeeze, and I began to feel all hot, my face, my legs, even my nails burned. . .And suddenly it came to me, like a lightening bolt, the pleasure . . .YAAAAAAAAAYYYYY...! And then, still dizzy from the thrill, I asked the chavalo, "What was that . . .? Because the two of us were so naive and unexperienced he could only say, "I guess it felt good?" When we came out of the woods, my friend Lupe, taking me by the arm, said to me...Qué pasó? ...I thought for a moment that you had run into La Llorona. And the four of us went back to town really quietly . . .Lupe and I stifling our giggles and our embarrassment . . . Wayward girls. . .and I liked it. (79-80)

Breaking these taboos is a hard thing to do, as Cota-Cárdenas tells us, "Forbidden love, those things that one should not talk about, that, my friends, is something else about our culture. . . Eso sí que es tabú, that's more taboo than it is in English . . . (36) And so, once again writing about sexuality, about taboos is dangerous, subversive.

Locas

What does it mean to be a loca? How are locas represented and stereotyped by the society in which they are formed. How do they function? Why are they used as cultural icons by Chicana writers, and why are they subversive? We know that throughout the ages society has tried to control women's minds and bodies by setting limits on sexuality and on their power. When women do not function within the norms set by society, they are considered to be outside those limits, out of control, fuera

de sí (outside of themselves). When a woman seems to be out of control people say, Pues, qué le pasa? 'sta loca (what's wrong with her, she's crazy) usually accompanied by a spiral gesture pointing at the head. In many ways, this 'sta loca provides an explanation for behavior that deviates from the standard. Quickly, let us review the imprints of language which emphasize this behavior. Crazy women in particular talk too much, often aimlessly, they are loquacious, they are lunatics (coming from moon, also connected to woman and her menstrual flow), they are loony. The word hysteric comes from the Greek hyster, meaning uterus. In the nineteenth century the womb was considered to be the cause of emotional illness. As women try to survive in societies that do not allow them the full range of their possibilities and the full expression of their potential, it is not unusual to see many women considered maladjusted, and hysterical.

In Chicano/Mexicano society there are fairly strong traditions as to how women should behave. Women should be good, like la Virgen María, they should be strong and silent, they should fulfill their responsibilities to family. They could however, be like Eva, the first temptress, a sexual woman. It has been an either/or proposition. If they are not good, then they must be bad. And bad women are evil, loose, escandalosas and malcriadas. Often locas are women who have tried to conform to familial, religious and societal rules and pressure, but have been unable to. In order to survive, the self-splits, fragments and becomes other. The other then can turn to anger (especially against oneself as in depression or in Corpi's image of a sliced tongue) or to unacceptable behavior in which La Loca is seen as a menace, or as a horror, to others. She has gone crazy. She is marginalized because she is out of

control and out of touch with "reality;" she is into her dark gifts.

As menacing as this loca state seems, it is embraced over and over by Chicana writers. Why? Why does this out of control woman have so much appeal? Certainly it cannot be because these locas are victimized by their madness and powerlessness; on the contrary it is precisely because once the anger and condition of being other is understood and assimilated by la Loca, this symbolic state of locura creates and appropriates a transcendent space for new ways of seeing and thinking, a space where anything is possible. Often spaces of locura are original, unique, unpredictable. Often locas show a rare courage. Moreover, even the creative state is seen as one of a temporary locura. Throughout literature it is the locas who see the truth, who arrive at new understandings. They are the ones who are clairvoyant, aha, back to that image again, unfettered by old ways of knowing, they are the women who are unhampered by rules and tradition.

In a poem "Cuarteto Mexicano," Pat Mora represents the icons of Mexican culture, Coatlique, Malinche, the Virgen de Guadalupe and La Llorona, as contemporary talk show hostesses giving advice. In the Malinche section, "Malinche's Tips: Pique from Mexico's Mother" Pat Mora writes,

My reputación
precedes me. I come
from a long line of women
much maligned,
hija de Eva,
rumors of gardens,
crushed flowery scent
. . .
Women. Snakes.
Snakes and tongues. Snake-haired
women. Loose-haired women. Loose-

tongued
 women. Open-mouthed women. Open
 women. Whores. Mothersssss.
 Virgin mothers.
 Women of closed
 uterus. Women
 of closed mouths. Women
 of covered hair. Women
 of cloaked
 bodies. Women
 who crush
 víboras. Women
 who crush their own tongues.
 Silent women.
 Altared women.
 Tip. 4: Alter
 the altared women.
 I became bilingual,
 learned to roll
 palabras in my mouth
 just to taste them,
 chew, swallow,
 fruta dulce. (Agua 64-66)

In this poem, Mora plays on images that re-connect women to ancient myths and to language. While the lyric speaker is Malinche, the Native woman who gave birth to the symbolically first mestizo child by Hernán Cortés, Mora nevertheless relates the image of Malinche to that of Eve, as well as to that of Coatlicue the all-powerful Aztec goddess, life giver and destroyer. Medusa is also connected in this symbolic circle back to Eve because of the snake images. Because Malinche was the female translator, she is spoken across her body and across her tongue. It is through her body that she creates the first mestizo child, and across her tongue that she creates a mestizo identity, a trilingual identity. As Eve is condemned in biblical history as a traitor, Malinche is condemned in Mexican history; like Eve she is cast out into the world as a seductress, prostitute, puta, hooker, bitch. Malinche

was feared and reviled because she controlled language and destiny; Coatlicue was feared because she is the powerful all-knowing and destructive goddess; Medusa is feared because, with her snake-like hair, she had the ability to turn people into stone. The space, or identity, that these women share is that of the angry woman, the mad heroine, la loca, living a space outside, the space of “Mi vida loca.” Moreover, a facet that Medusa, Coatlicue, Malinche and La Llorona share with woman writers is that most of the characteristics essential to any kind of creative or artistic achievement are valued in men, but are considered negative and unnatural in women. Some of these are initiative, assertiveness, strength, aggressiveness, and physical or intellectual superiority, often the outstanding characteristics of the mad heroine.

Through the Locas portrayed in Chicana literature, Chicana writers challenge the cultural stereotypes about women and through their voices reflect their tensions as women “living and working in a male world,” standing “as a metaphor for female experience in a fragmented world (Kilgore 4).” Often women writers do not write autobiographically about themselves as artists, but instead “create female lunatics and cloak in illness what is in essence the fury, fear, conflict, artistic selfishness and self-assertiveness intrinsic to artistic accomplishment, but antithetical to traditional conceptions of femininity” (Kilgore 6). Indeed often the lunacy is directed precisely against those who want the heroine to be a “good girl,” against the tyranny of niceness. Because the mad heroine is outside the norms, she explores new ways of thinking and escapes the “female” code. She can emphasize the dissonance in women’s lives. However, because Medusa turned people into stone she may represent the fear that self-assertiveness and growth may

hurt others. “Her power to turn life into stone is the threatening power, to the writer, of inflicting silence.. she represents the threatened revenge of a male world . . . the intellectual and thinking head severed from the female body” Kilgore (16). For all of these reasons Mora links the loose-haired women to the loose-tongued women.

Thus this vida loca, this crazy, horrible space, is deeply and profoundly linked to woman, womb, and word. The mad heroine symbolizes women’s sense of fragmentation and monstrosity in a society where they are designated as “the Other”. They represent not only the grotesque images of the female self but also the circumstances which teach women to see themselves as such. Beyond this however, the mad woman “frequently reveals the creative women” behind Medusa’s mask.

I believe that contemporary Chicana writers go beyond this mere representation of the mad woman, and take the symbolic space created by La Loca, as well as by la cuandera, the secret teller, the holder of dark gifts in order to speak, have courage, abolish fears and come to an understanding of these fears by facing them straight on. They take these unacceptable spaces, turning them into a powerful and transformative ones.

Finally I want to discuss the loose women so artfully depicted by Sandra Cisneros and others. In *Loose Woman* 1994, we see represented the “bitchy” heroine, a doubling device meant to be read against the eyes of good women. These loose women do not succumb to the tyranny of niceness, rather they are the locas who “break laws, upset the natural order, anguish the Pope and make fathers cry” (Loose 12). They are “loose-tongued, let-loose, women on the loose” who are wicked and “break things”. Their choices are between

being “good” and being powerful, and they choose to be powerful. They join the long line of freewheeling, liberated, angry locas slinging crockery at their men, at the world. These loose women let their minds, their tongues and their language hurl themselves at control, order and limitation. In these poems we see the lyric speaker’s lack of control and alienated identity, particularly manifest when in “Pumpkin Eater” Cisneros says;

I’m no trouble.
 Honest to God
 I’m not.
 I’m not
 The kind of woman
 who telephones in the middle of the
 night...
 --who told you that?--
 splitting the night like machete. . .
 No, no, not me . . .
 I swear, I swear, I swear . . .

I’m no hysteric,
 terrorist
 emotional anarchist. (170)

What we can learn from Chicana/Latina Feminists

Several years ago I went to a panel discussion for a Chicana Art show titled “Bad Girls: Las Hociconas.” The subjects of both the show and the panel were precisely about silence, voice and the power to speak; about taboos, about sex, about violence, about our other selves. The women included in the show clearly saw themselves as malcriadas, bad girls who are speaking up and seizing their voices. The show was a contestation and a dialogue with an incident in 2001 when a show in Santa Fe, Cyber Arte, attracted a good deal of controversy because of a digital painting by Alma López depicting the Virgin of Guadalupe in

a rose covered bathing suit and standing in a way that not only displayed her body but also her power. At her feet, the angel holding her up was portrayed as a bare-breasted angel. This small piece generated physical and verbal threats against the artist and the curator of the show, Tey Marianna Nunn, and condemnation by the Archbishop of Santa Fe and others. Many academics and community members, however, defended the show and the artist's right to portray the Virgin of Guadalupe icon as a powerful woman. In the current "Bad-girls" show then, 18 artists displayed provocative works challenging traditional notions of womanhood saying "it means that there is a Chicana badgirl in every one of us, speaking truths, visions, hopes and criticism necessary to greater individual integrity and to the acceptance of seemingly irreconcilable differences within our own selves, and thereby our families, our communities (Pérez, 5).

Commenting about "Ya Basta," Tina Hernández writes, "My fascination with these bad girls stems from my idea that these characters at least know what they want (sexually that is) and are not ashamed of their bodies"(9). In "Chica Loca", Marie Romero Cash "reflects every woman's inner creature; the woman she would really like to be. Catwoman is strong, fierce, unafraid of any challenge. She is not easily intimidated and has the craft and cunning to come out on top, unscathed. Meow...!"(In Pérez 10). And in "La Llorana in Lillith's Gardens", Delilah Montoya writes, "both Lillith and La Llorana continue to haunt the terrestrial realm as evil spirits. These women were presented as monsters and constructed to send a lesson to young girls on how to behave... the installation provocatively explores the traditional double standards that determine appropriate behavior for women and invests

these female archetypes with new meaning" (In Pérez 15). Pola López piece, "I am not a hood ornament," represents a form of rebellion against woman as ornamentation as does her "Huipil-Vestido de Mujer" which explores many of the different representations, infinite divisions if you will, of Chicana identity.

The show is the culmination of a long running commentary which has been at the root of Chicana feminism: how do Chicanas of all ages, social status, and geographical locations learn to find their voices, speak up and fight back? As one of the co-curators noted, "Chicana badgirls, hociconas, big mouths, loud mouth, women who talk back. They're the ones who won't stay quiet, who won't make nice, won't pretend everything's okay when it's not. Badgirl hociconas don't behave in a world of double-standards, whether these be men over women, heterosexuals over queer folk, haves over have nots, "white" people over those "of color," and so on. They shouldn't" (Pérez, 3). It seems, then, that these long years of Chicana feminist writers, critics and artists have taken root, deep deep roots, spread the seeds and are producing a harvest of creativity, determination and above all voice.

While often the anger of las locas is turned against themselves, in Chicana literature the anger is turned against social injustice and cultural silencing. It expresses itself with wild language, the language that tells things as they are, that puts its finger on the pulse of the taboos, that describes the horrors and the violences women suffer. These loose women, malcriada locas, so eloquently captured by Chicana writers, have created a special place, a place of women who live life to the fullest, who talk and scream, tell secrets and push away the mysteries, who recreate or invent a new language, who write and create themselves. The

space created in "La vida loca," with the clarividente, with the family secret teller, is a useful paradigm which allows Chicana authors to label, articulate, allow, and make conscious their experiences in dealing with the dissonance in their lives between myth and reality, to express their anger and fury as does Medusa/Coatlicue. They finally seize the power of all the powerful women such as La Malinche and Coatlicue, in order to redeem the loca and the clarividente as fulfilled, profound, sensitive and transformative figures. Las locas, malcriadas are not to be feared. To paraphrase Helene Cixous as well as Gloria Anzaldúa, you only have to look, really really look, at Medusa (or Coatlicue) straight on to see her. And they are not deadly, nor are they terrible. They are beautiful and they are laughing.

So perhaps this literature is to be feared, and we can see why it may be banned: it seizes language and gives voice to that which before was silent, repressed, unsaid. It represents nontraditional knowledge and behavior which can lead to a new understanding of multiple and contemporary realities—it can be a guide to truths that remain unacknowledged and to perceptions that have been ignored. It gives a voice and language to strong and powerful figures that recognize inequality and injustice and it cannot be silenced—just as you cannot stop progress and education by shooting little girls, neither can you silence Chicanas by banning and removing their books. These are the transitions and transformations contained in these banned books.

Oh, and by the way. The night my grandmother died, she came to me in a dream, saying, "Adiós, Adiosito" and I said, "Que te vaya bien, pero muy muy bien abuelita."

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