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Ashley Denney

Kansas State University Manhattan, Kansas In

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Cultural Reclamations in Helena Viramontes' "The Moths"

Keywords

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Cultural Reclamations in Helena Viramontes’ “The Moths”

Ashley Denney
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas

In the preface to the foundational collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherríe Moraga addressed the problem commonly faced by feminist women of color who struggle with oppression from sexism in the civil rights movement and from racism in the feminist movement (xviii). These tensions were made clear in the very foundations of the Mexican-American civil rights movement. The *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, which declared the purpose of the Chicano movement, presented a vision of idealized, united brotherhood, but failed to address the concerns of Chicana women (Pratt 861). The exclusion of

women's issues was not due to mere negligence; concerns about gender issues were so marginalized that those Mexican-American women who identified as feminists were often referred to as traitors (Pratt 862). Allegations of selling out to the dominant culture from the men within the Chicano movement and the threat of assimilation from the white feminist movement forced Chicana writers to draw on cultural traditions in order to create space for themselves as women of color who fell outside of traditional gender roles and expectations.

Chicana authors use cultural traditions to show that it is not necessary to choose between being a Chicana or being a feminist while simultaneously criticizing the patriarchal aspects of their culture. In this regard, the re-articulations of traditional tropes present in *The Moths and Other Stories* by Helena Viramontes have garnered particular critical attention. Ana María Carbonell, for example, explores the role of the traditional La Llorona myth in Viramontes' story "The Cariboo Café" while JoAnn Pavletich and Margot Gayle Backus analyze Viramontes' re-articulation of the corrido narrative, a traditional form of ballad in "which the traditional male corrido hero's defiance remains securely anchored to masculine authority" (130-31), in the story "Neighbors." Unfortunately, the volume's title story "The Moths" has been largely overlooked by critics. In "The Moths," Viramontes roots her criticisms and her solutions in Chicano culture. Specifically, she uses an inverted tale of La Llorona to criticize the traditional family hierarchy and offers the curandera tradition with its spiritual,

medical, and community implications as an alternative role for women, thus proving that it is possible to criticize and reject sexist aspects of Mexican-American culture while still maintaining a Chicana identity.

Viramontes centers her criticism around the patriarchal structure of the family in Mexican-American culture as a way to expose the fallible nature of traditional gender roles. A main concern of the Chicano movement in the 1970s and 1980s was the preservation of the traditional family structure. In this model, the role of protecting Mexican-American culture fell to a strong, central father figure (Morrow 67). In "The Moths," the father of the family typifies the domineering father figure idealized by the Chicano movement. The scene in which the father attempts to force the narrator to attend Mass is a striking example of the way in which the patriarchal attempt to forcefully uphold cultural norms can be expressed through manipulation. The father "strategically directed his anger at Amá for her lousy ways of bringing up daughters, being disrespectful and unbelieving" (Viramontes 169). In this scene, the father upholds the cultural tradition of the Catholic Church by attempting to force the narrator to attend Mass. He also casts doubt on Amá's abilities as a mother. The father's manipulation exemplifies the patriarchal nature of the family structure in two ways. First, it relies on the notion of a male-only protector of culture who will resort to manipulating his own family in order to forcefully uphold cultural mores. Second, by accusing Amá of being a bad mother, the father places her in the category of destructive

motherhood, thus calling up the traditional good mother/bad mother dichotomy which exists in Chicano folklore and religious beliefs. By presenting a father figure who is in line with traditional ideas family and gender roles, Viramontes reveals the manipulation implicit in a structure which relies on a forceful protector of cultural knowledge.

When the father in "The Moths" accuses Amá of raising her daughters as being disrespectful, he implicitly identifies her as a mother who threatens Chicano culture due to her supposed failure to raise her daughters in a way that conforms to traditional Catholic standards of behavior. Traditional tropes of motherhood in Mexican-American culture center around the dichotomy between the Virgin Mary, the passive and selfless mother, and dangerous and destructive mother figures such as La Malinche, the woman who selfishly betrayed her people to the Spanish conquerors, and La Llorona, a sort of ghostly figure who drowns her children and is doomed to wander the earth weeping for them (Carbonell 56). The father's censure of Amá is an attempt to force her to remain in the idealized passive role of motherhood represented by the Virgin. Although Amá is accused of departing from the path of the good mother, Viramontes depicts Amá as a passive mother throughout "The Moths." When her husband accuses her of being a terrible mother, Amá does not reply. Instead, the other daughters bully their younger sister into going to Mass as a way of protecting their mother. Later, when the narrator returns from buying soup for her grandmother, Amá is found sobbing in the kitchen, not by her mother's bedside. That

Amá weeps while her daughter puts away the soup she has bought for her grandmother indicates that the burden of caring for Abuelita has fallen entirely to the narrator. Amá takes no active role in caring for her own mother; instead, she passively relies on her daughter for comfort, barely ceasing her cries to ask “¿Y mi Amá?” (Viramontes 170). Amá’s helpless weeping indicates her own powerlessness as a mother to aid her daughter. By painting a portrait of Amá as a mother who embodies the ideal of passive motherhood, Viramontes points out the problematic nature of this supposed ideal. In her passivity, Amá has been rendered helpless to protect her own child and must instead turn to her daughters for comfort and protection from her own husband and in the face of her mother’s death.

Viramontes contrasts the protagonist and her sisters: the narrator does not protect her mother from the truth of Abuelita’s illness, rather the narrator challenges Amá’s passivity by attempting to provoke her. Frustrated with her mother’s weeping, the narrator informs Amá that Abuelita has repeatedly fallen out of bed. Passing on this information does nothing to protect Amá and only makes her cry harder. However, it does indicate the narrator’s refusal to merely accept her mother’s passivity. Instead, the narrator erupts with anger at her mother, explaining her attempts to upset Amá as a result of being “angry and just so tired of the quarrels and beatings” (Viramontes 170). Viramontes uses this scene to draw a stark contrast between the narrator and her mother. As the daughter lashes out in anger, a built-up response to numerous quarrels, her mother responds by

looking “confused, angry...filled with sorrow” (Viramontes 170). However, she gives her daughter no reply. In her anger, the daughter actively lashes out while Amá retains her role as the passive mother figure.

Viramontes constructs the division of passive versus active between Amá and the narrator to criticize the ideal of docile motherhood. Amá and her daughter, the narrator, each embody one half of the passive Virgin/aggressive Llorona split. If the ideal mother is the passive Virgin Mary, the destructive La Llorona, a legendary woman who is said to have drowned her children, is her antithesis. While Amá is an expression of the passivity of the ideal mother, the Virgin Mary, the narrator is a more complicated embodiment of La Llorona. While tales of La Llorona traditionally operate to uphold gender roles by painting women who act outside of the role of traditional motherhood as miserable and destructive, Chicana writers such as Viramontes have rewritten Llorona tales to depict such women as subversive figures (Carbonell 56-57). For example, Ana Maria Carbonell views the washer woman in another Viramontes’ story “The Cariboo Café” as a re-articulation of La Llorona as a figure of maternal resistance. For Carbonell, the major indicators that Viramontes gives to signal the washer woman’s role as La Llorona are the washer woman’s constant cries for her lost child (Carbonell 59) and her connection to water. Carbonell examines two appearances of water in “The Cariboo Café.” In the first, Carbonell claims that Viramontes presents water as a destructive force because it distracts the washer woman from her attention to her son:

“when he wanted to play, my feet were in pools of water” (60). Later, water is referred to again as the washer woman dies and is “blinded by liquid darkness.” In this instance, Carbonell suggests that the washer woman “finds union with her son in the afterlife” and so “water becomes the medium through which she can actively transform her dismembered self into a unified maternal figure” (64). In moving the washer woman from loss to reconnection with her son, Carbonell argues that Viramontes rewrites *La Llorona* as a woman who resists separation from her children and thus embodies active maternal resistance (71).

Similarly, in “The Moths,” Viramontes associates the narrator with *La Llorona* through images of water. The most significant appearance of water in “The Moths” occurs at the end of the story, as the narrator bathes Abuelita’s body. Water is connected to religion when the narrator fills a basin with water and then drapes towels over her shoulders “with the sacredness of a priest preparing his vestments” (Viramontes 171). In this context, water becomes holy and connects the narrator to organized religion, echoing the influence of the Catholic Church. In the final moments of the story, the narrator is most closely connected to the story of *La Llorona*. Filling the bathtub with water, the narrator enters the water, not to destroy her grandmother’s life but to care for her now that she is dead. As the narrator weeps for her mother and grandmother in a bathtub overflowing with water, her role as a *Llorona* figure becomes clear. The final reference to water furthers the narrator’s association with *La Llorona* by connecting water to motherhood as the narrator

in her loneliness wishes she could “return to the waters of the womb...so that we would never be alone again” (Viramontes 171). Through these references, Viramontes flips the traditional tale of La Llorona on its head – instead of a mother weeping near water for a child she has drowned, Viramontes presents readers with the story of a child weeping for the loss of her mother and grandmother. The inversion of the tale of La Llorona functions as a criticism of the way patriarchal notions of gender and motherhood affect the relationships between mother and daughter.

As the narrator weeps in the bathtub, she is mourning two losses: the death of Abuelita and the separation from her mother. The nature of this dual loss further highlights Viramontes’ criticism of sexist gender roles. After the loss of her grandmother, who has been her teacher and protector, the natural place for the daughter to turn is to her mother. However, as described above, the notion of ideal motherhood as passive acceptance of the father as the head of the household has removed the narrator’s mother from the role of protector of her daughter. The only way Amá has been able to protect her daughter is by sending her to Abuelita’s house. With Abuelita dead, the narrator has lost her place of safety. Viramontes’ inverted tale of La Llorona indicts the damaging nature of oppressive gender roles. The notion of men as the rulers of the household does not guarantee safety, according to this criticism; rather it damages families by isolating mothers from daughters. By presenting Amá as the embodiment of the passive Virgin Mary and her daughter as a resistant

Llorona character who weeps for her loss of safety and the separation from her mother, Viramontes shows that the traditional, idealized view of mothers as passive figures actually does damage to daughters by robbing them of a place of protection.

Although Viramontes criticizes the sexist expectations of Chicana mothers which prevent them from protecting their daughters, she does not reject the entire Mexican-American culture. While the narrator does not fall into the ideal of Chicana womanhood upheld by her father as the proper form of femininity, she does not divorce herself from her culture. Instead, she turns away from the patriarchal gender role offered by her father and looks to another family member for guidance. The narrator, sent to her grandmother's house by her mother to escape more punishment for her violation of gender norms, finds tasks suitable for her "bull hands," which though incapable of performing "the fineries of embroidery," are perfectly deft at helping Abuelita in the garden or caring for her grandmother when she becomes ill (Viramontes 168-169). In her own home, the narrator indicates her own discomfort, saying, "I wasn't even pretty or nice like my sisters and I just couldn't do the girl things they could do" (Viramontes 168). The narrator's inability to do "girl things" signals her reluctance to take on the traditional roles embodied by her mother and sisters and promoted by her father and the Catholic Church. Instead, working alongside Abuelita, the narrator finds a place of belonging where she feels "safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel"

(Viramontes 169).

At Abuelita's house, the narrator finds tasks which offer her a different way of being a woman that do not require her to passively conform to traditional gender roles and instead offer her a place as a future protector of her culture. At Abuelita's house, the narrator plants flowers and herbs and grinds chiles. Abuelita's vast knowledge of plants coupled with her ability to heal using that knowledge connects her to the curandera tradition, an important part of Chicano culture. Curanderas practice and thus preserve a specific form of cultural knowledge which is a hybrid of Spanish and indigenous traditions (Morrow 68). As a curandera who passes her knowledge to her granddaughter, Abuelita is a protector of Chicano culture who stands in contrast to the narrator's father. While the father strives to protect his culture by forcing his daughter to go to church, the grandmother engages in cultural preservation in a more egalitarian way by passing on her knowledge. By juxtaposing these two figures, Viramontes demonstrates that cultural traditions can be preserved without domination and establishes space for women as cultural protectors. She also offers an alternative cultural tradition in which women can reject traditional gender roles and patriarchal domination without erasing their cultural background. Viramontes' articulation of the curandera tradition in "The Moths" illustrates one way women can take on the role of cultural protectors while her inclusion of the Llorona narrative illustrates why women need the opportunity to step outside of the sexist ideal of female passivity.

The brief narrative of “The Moths” by Helena Viramontes accomplishes a great deal. Viramontes criticizes the notion of the family championed by the Chicano movement which featured fathers as the protectors of culture and mothers as ideally passive. In presenting the narrator as a daughter weeping for the loss of her mother and grandmother, Viramontes parts ways with traditional tales of La Llorona to illustrate the way ideal notions of passive mothers harm families because they create divisions between mothers and daughters. In exposing the way traditional notions of “good” motherhood rely on passive compliance, Viramontes indicates that there is a need for an alternative form of Chicana womanhood. Yet Viramontes does not wholly abandon her cultural background. Instead, she shows that though there are patriarchal facets of Chicano culture, women can use non-sexist aspects of Mexican-American traditions to form alternative gender roles. In offering readers the curandera tradition, which provides a way for women to take on the role of active cultural protector and teacher, Viramontes breaks away from the notion that culture must be protected through the enforcement of sexist family structures and presents a method for handing down traditions in a more egalitarian fashion. Helena Viramontes puts a new twist on the Llorona story in “The Moths” and, in so doing, joins with other Chicana feminist writers who illustrate that it is not necessary to accept sexism in order to maintain a Chicana identity and resist assimilation into dominant white culture.

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