“The Dark Lady”: Resistance to Racial and Sexual Stereotypes in 20th-Century Chicana Literature

“If Chicanas can gain acceptance of being complex figures, of being good girls and more, they might be satisfied. They could be portrayed in the work of both women and men in a realistic way as women of infinite divisions, or infinite dimensions. At the same time, the figure of the wicked woman, the troublemaker, the woman who speaks and writes, is a very appealing one. It is an image that Chicana writers are not only willing to accept and to integrate, but one that they enthusiastically and passionately embrace.”

-Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*

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The Dark Lady

The colored woman has always been the subject of erotic fascination. When viewed through the white male gaze, the hue of her skin and the allure of her gender creates a heady mix that tempts away from the perceived bounds of the white race. A sexual interaction between Chicanas and men allowed the latter to safely explore the exotic, but within the confines of an encounter that traditionally places the male in a racially and sexually dominant position, particularly in colonial settings. The Mexican-American woman's appearance in 20th century literature written by white men is in body only - her physical characteristics, skin color, and sexual prowess take precedence over her thoughts and interiority. She is an object of desire, and is often treated as a stock figure or archetype rather than as an individual that possesses her own agency. The first half of the 1900s would be a time of negative literary depictions, where stereotypes reigned and her voice was all but silenced. Those women that *could* break the mold were typically in the upper classes, and were unrepresentative of the wider populace; indeed, contradictory language and misogyny entered the narrative of even those most willing to break taboos. The second half of the 1900s brought radical change that impacted everyone and everything: Chicanas were no exception. The rise of the civil and women's rights movements opened doors of self-representation that never before existed, and the fervor with which Mexican-American women sought to reclaim and reshape their identities - often by subversively casting *themselves* as dark ladies - speaks to both the major cultural shifts occurring in the 20th century and to the strength and power of how images and stereotypes can evolve over time.

The dark lady as a phrase is multifaceted: it refers to the color of her skin, to be sure, but a more nuanced reading shows that her darkness can simultaneously be considered both a threat

and an asset. To outsiders, she is 'dark' because the color of her skin must ostensibly reflect her personality, and therefore she is something to be tamed or controlled; she is a vixen, wicked, and is therefore not quite human - and can be treated as an Other. To Mexican-American women, to the *mujeres callejeras* themselves, being 'dark' is a tool for resistance, an identity to be worn proudly that upends notions of sexual and racial submission. In an intriguing paradox, the very existence of stereotypes that appeared in early literatures gave Chicanas something to work *against*. Stereotypes gave rise to an anti-stereotype literary resistance, which may not have been possible if there had not been negative representations at all. Not all Mexican-American writers embrace the dark lady - and indeed, highly patriarchal Chicano/a communities that persist to the present day oftentimes still cast an outspoken woman as a "troublemaker" - but the trend in 20th-century Chicana literature that celebrates and makes visible the wicked woman is a testament to the influence that the label has maintained over the decades since its inception, and to the women that used it to buck the status quo.

The Onslaught: Stereotyping the Mexican-American Woman, 1900-1939

At the beginning of the century, much of the information that Americans received about Mexican-American women - information that would shape perceptions of their race and gender even until the present day - came from literary depictions in conquest fictions and westerns, and these genres were defined and dominated by white male writers. In the early 1900s, she was characterized in terms of her skin color and her Mexican-American *inbetweenness*, and was, given the linguistic preference of the author, a "vixen," "dark lady," "mongrel," "halfbreed harlot," "brown whore" or "dark-hued slut."[1] The stories of O. Henry speak to the uneasy ways

[1] Arthur G. Pettit, *Images of the Mexican American in Fiction and Film* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1980), 61-65.

in which Mexican-American women were shown to straddle two different cultures: belonging neither to Mexico nor America, she is even more inexplicable, and the bastardized Spanish/ Anglo-Saxon hybrid of names given to her - “Panchita O’Brien,” “Tonia Perez,” and “Pancha Sales” - reflect a sense of being unclassifiable.[2] Cultural ambiguity aside, there was no question as to the absoluteness of her coloring. Her skin, equated with her sexual appetite, was portrayed as inexhaustible and carnal, a drive that was distinctly for pleasure rather than for procreation. Her looseness is treated as a side-effect of her dark skin, an inherent flaw of her race rather than a character choice given to her by the writer. Frequently, the Chicana woman was framed in order to create a foil between herself and a pure white woman (the latter of which was also a stock archetype and often treated just as condescendingly as a Mexican-American woman, although her place in the social hierarchy was more respected than a Chicana’s):

> The harlot fulfills the libidinous needs of the man who will eventually reject her, and she guarantees the chastity of the woman he will eventually marry. Always, however, she is a secondary character. The primary sexual emphasis is on the purity of the white heroine and the corresponding ultimate redemption of the white hero, who is rarely condemned for his transgressions unless he sows oats with white virgins. His return to the embrace the forgiveness of the white heroine is made possible because the halfbreed harlot is presumed to have been the aggressor.[3]

While she is described as being a “secondary character” - and this is certainly true in terms of her role and visibility in a given text - she is nevertheless a crucial element to the whites that interact with her; the sexual morality tale of a book relies on her to form a juxtaposition, making her presence central to the underlying theme(s). Though the depiction is negative, her centrality to solidifying the integrity of a white male/female relationship belies the throwaway nature of her

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[2] Pettit, 123-124.

[3] Pettit, 62.

role, and gives a surprising amount of power to what would otherwise be a forgettable character. Nevertheless, these women "...must be rejected because their religion, their complexions, and their pasts are shadowed."[4] This pattern plays itself out over and over again; writers of southwestern fiction in the early 20th century - such as Edward Plummer Alsbury, Pendleton Hogan, and Zane Grey - all utilized the same lexicon of derogatory phrases and scenarios, wherein the brown whore is sexually available but not romantically so, and is inevitably ousted by the superior white virgin. The popularity of these literatures was due in part to the mass consumption and proliferation of cheap dime novels and easily accessible pulp magazines, which emphasized the sensational aspects of border and western life, leaving little room for anything but the one-dimensionality of the Mexican-American woman.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Great Depression was in full swing, and the degraded economy and the upsurge in conservatism meant that there was little deviation from what had become standard fare in terms of Chicana literary representation. The unemployment crisis "turn[ed] all Mexican Americans into deportable Mexican immigrants...[so that] 350,00 to 600,000 people [were deported] during the depression," a hostile environment that was reflected in the continuing stereotypes of Chicanas as loose "halfbreeds" to be used only as sexual objects.[5] In the midst of mass deportations, the Mexican-American women that stayed in the U.S. had to adopt American attitudes, a "strategy for assimilation...[that] gave women access and a license to explore sexual identities beyond the control of the patriarchal 'macho' typical of

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[4] Pettit, 63.

[5] José F. Aranda, *When We Arrive: A New Literary History of Mexican America* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 142.

Mexican families."[6] While there is a certain agency that comes from exploring sexuality in this way, assimilating arguably further eroticized a woman's skin color, as it blurred the lines between an American woman and a Mexican woman even more; in essence, as colored women became more entrenched in American society, the allure of the dark Other increased. Even as negative racial portrayals continued and sexual ones waned, the persisting nature of these stereotypes wouldn't alter considerably until after World War II, and even then it would take a total upheaval in American culture for Chicana women to start making waves in mainstream literary circles.

That said, sexual relations between men and women were changing macrocosmically throughout the United States by the 1930s, and thus made even more complex the open hostility towards Mexican-Americans at the same time that Chicana portrayals began shifting ever so slightly towards the positive. Many literatures are replete with examples of the typical dark lady well into the Great Depression, but something new was becoming apparent. As white women began claiming an open sexuality for themselves, colored and white women began to find themselves on similar sexual levels:

> In the liberated atmosphere of the modern [1930s-era] pulps, brown beauties offer no more than color variation to break the monotony. This startling degree of sexual leveling has rendered unnecessary, if obsolete, one of the primary Mexican characters in the traditional border western: the halfbreed whore...Once the white heroine was permitted to trespass on sexual territory formerly the province of the brown harlot, the essential difference between the two became part of our pop-cultural past.[7]

The argument could be made that this transition began an erasure of the Chicana as a character on her own; her vanishment obliterates any power that she exerted on the male protagonists in

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[6] Aranda, 144.

[7] Pettit, 125-126.

the novels she is featured in, making her no longer distinguishable from white women in terms of sex - made even more noteworthy given assimilation practices that were occurring alongside these changes. While she could no longer be condemned sexually, she was still a target for racism: "The color bar had survived the sexual liberation of the white woman...[Chicanas that were] 'freed' sexually since the first conquest novels, [were] still held in racial if not sexual bondage."[8] The history of Mexican-American female literary stereotypes, especially in early literature, is a lengthy session of push and pull: there are few, if any, groundbreaking moments, but rather a tepid slouch forward where small gains were often offset by small losses; a white woman's advantage seemingly signaled an upward movement for Chicanas, but the repercussions merely altered the focus of stereotypes, and not the stereotypes themselves. By the end of the 1930s, little had actually changed, and the dark lady persisted even whilst white women claimed new rights.

María Cristina Mena: An Unsteady Resistance

Defying the conventions of Chicana sexuality and identity set by white male writers, María Cristina Mena represents in microcosm the literary backlash to the negative portrayals of her race and gender. Arguably the only well-known female Mexican-American writer of the early 1900s, she flouted the idea that Chicanas (and women more broadly) could exist only as sexual objects for men, and painted complex portraits of women challenged the cartoonish vulgarities of the hyper-sexualized dark lady depicted in so many novels of the era. Mena was unable to avoid completely the pitfalls of her time; her stories are rife with classist and confusingly misogynistic viewpoints that clash with the interiority of her subjects. Her Chicana characters are layered and

[8] Pettit, 126.

varied, but the suggestion in some of her depictions is that female autonomy and agency is not connected to a lifting of racial prejudice, that, indeed, a confrontation of racial discrimination is not necessarily part of the Chicana liberation process at all: "[Her] stories argue that gender is social, discursive, and abstract but stop short of making this same argument about race."[9] These contradictions and conflicts are indicative of the age in which she lived and the patriarchal culture in which she was steeped - and her fallacies cannot be ignored if they are to be criticized in the writings of her male counterparts. Although certainly problematic, she nevertheless embodies a resistance to literary norms that set a precedent for future Chicana writers.

In Mena's short story, "The Gold Vanity Set" (1913), there is a critique of the male idealization of the female form and face; the protagonist, Petra, is enchanted by a white woman's make-up set, particularly the ivory powder, which she puts on her skin and "perceive[s] an [a]esthetic improvement."[10] Her new color revives her alcoholic husband's attraction to her, and he instantly promises to never mistreat her again, and Miss Young, to whom the vanity set belongs, relinquishes it to Petra. Though it would ostensibly appear that "The Gold Vanity Set" is about the woman as an object of superficial fascination for the male eye, Mena disrupts this idea in favor of an examination of Petra's own thoughts and feelings about the transformation in her skin; she is enchanted with her looks, and not the effect the looks have on others: "Her eyes - how much larger they were, and how much brighter! She looked into them, laughed into them, broke off to leap and dance, looked again in many ways, sidelong, droopingly, coquettishly."[11]

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[9] Marissa K. López, *Chicano Nations: The Hemispheric Origins of Mexican American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 108.

[10] María Cristina Mena, *The Collected Stories of María Cristina Mena* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1997), 5.

[11] Mena, 5.

Her husband is ludicrously ineffective as a partner, and the interest she has in make-up is in relation to her conception of her identity, and is in no way erotic; rather, it is a tool that is used to explore her own conception of herself, and the renewed sexual interest on her husband's part is written as darkly satirical. That said, there is little self-awareness on either Mena's part or the parts of her characters about the role women play in re-enforcing racial norms onto one another. The equation of beauty with whiteness is never questioned, and while there is a subtle condemnation of whiteness as necessary to reinvigorating a man's sexual interest, it is mostly in the context of gender rather than skin color itself: her "stories present fully developed characters struggling against the constraints of culturally defined womanhood, but the stories stop short of making the same argument about race...[the stories] seem unaware of women's subsequent roles as race-making agents."[12]

Mena depicts the archetypal fallen woman in her story entitled "Doña Rita's Rivals" (1914), in which she allows Piedad, a prostitute, to have an active political voice and shows her leaving the sex trade without sentimentalizing or moralizing: she simply "refuse[d] to accept any payment for the service she had rendered [to Jesús María]...and quietly abandoned all her possessions, which were at the house in the Street of the Lost Child" in order to marry Jesús, the son of the eponymous Doña Rita and the recipient of Piedad's political advice.[13] Mena appears to purposefully seize the white man's stereotype in order to retool and reclaim it; Piedad controls her sexuality, and has interests outside of gendered normalities. Politics, typically a realm for men, is now a dominion for women, and she also helps steer her husband in the

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[12] López, 102.

[13] Mena, 81.

direction of liberality, thus becoming a player in the game and not just an observer. Yet, the two women in the story - Piedad and Doña Rita - have their roles as women shaped by their husband and son, respectively:

> Though "Doña Rita's Rivals" depicts a woman-centered world wherein the politics of race and class are redefined, that world is still beholden to colonial conceptions of gender, represented by the fact that Jesús narrates the constructions of femininity within which the women operate. He writes the poems featuring his mother as Joan of Arc and the Virgin; he absolved Piedad of sin; and Jesus, ultimately, determines his own reformist program, despite Piedad's interventions.[14]

Mena's very human unevenness can be read either as a subconscious internalization of the misogynistic language that was so prevalent in her lifetime or a true personal uncertainty about the role a woman should play in public and private life. Likely, it was a combination of both that led to the unconventional, conventional representations of women that are on display in her work. Even still, Mena herself can be seen as a "dark lady" or "wicked woman" - she speaks her opinion and writes women that are agents of their own bodies and selves, making trouble by subverting offensive portrayals of her race and gender by the mere fact of getting into the heads of Chicanas, rather than propping them up as *things* to be used or mocked.

The Mid-Century Gap: The Dark Lady Vanishes, 1939-1954

The deportations during the Great Depression were ironically and abruptly reversed as the United States's entrance into World War II deprived the country of men, the primary source of agricultural and manual labor. An agreement made between the U.S. and Mexico allowed hundreds of thousands of Mexicans to legally migrate (albeit temporarily) to America in order to take up farm and railroad jobs - for low wages - that would allow the U.S. economy to meet the challenges of a massive, costly war. Known as the Bracero Program, it "is widely acknowledged

[14] López, 105.

for having established a general pattern and social context for Mexican immigration."[15] In a sense, it opened a door that could never be fully shut again. Meant to only last the length of the war, the program was not formally dissolved until 1964, with hundreds of thousands of Mexicans streaming into the the U.S. for the entirety of the 22 years in which it was in effect. Though many were forced to return to Mexico at the end of the war, many stayed illegally, and immigration continued well into the 1960s; even though men were predominantly the ones "imported" from Mexico, families and marriages occurred often enough for burgeoning communities to become rooted in the U.S., and particularly in the southwest. Reactions to the incoming Mexicans were mostly negative, exemplified by a contemporary observer, who stated that:

> Generally speaking, the Latin-American migratory worker going into west Texas is regarded as a necessary evil...one might assume that he is not a human being at all, but a species of farm implement that comes mysteriously and spontaneously into being coincident with the maturing of cotton...when the crop has been harvested, [he] vanishes into the limbo of forgotten things until the next harvest season rolls around. He has no past, no future, only a brief and anonymous present.[16]

This "farm implement" did not vanish from the literal space, but the dark lady inexplicably disappears from literary narratives during the mid-century. The closing of the Western frontier was likely a major factor in her inexplicable absence. With the untamed, uncolonized western territories now dutifully tamed and colonized after decades of government sponsorship towards its industrialization, she, just like the land, lost a once romantic and exotic appeal. The diminishing popularity of western novels - the genre in which she was typically featured - synced with the end of the previously "wild" west. There was little need for Chicana stereotypes when

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[15] Aranda, 144.

[16] Pauline R. Kibbe, *Latin Americans in Texas* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1948), 176.

all western stereotypes slowly lost their readership. The contradiction between an influx of Mexican immigrants and the lack of their presence in literature could perhaps be further explained by the focus on an external threat that dominated the 1940s: the Japanese and Germans. There is no clear rationale for the dark lady's strange absence - as well as the Mexican and Mexican-American as a group, especially as a re-emergence of the genre "...in the Eisenhower 1950s [renewed] the popularity of the American West in...popular fiction...[where] the darker sides of the frontier...furnished fuller, more human portraits of the western past."[17] This bizarre hiatus of Chicana stereotypes did not mean that Chicana writers themselves lay dormant. Indeed, more voices joined the chorus of the emerging Mexican-American literary pantheon in the years following the groundwork laid by María Cristina Mena; these writings formed the foundation and inspiration for the explosion of Chicana narratives near the end of the century.

Fabiola Cabeza de Baca: Chicana Representations in Transition

Though not a prolific writer, de Baca's non-fiction encapsulates the growing Chicano/a communities that began developing rapidly during the middle of the 1900s. Uninterested in portraying the Mexican-American woman as sexual or even particularly attentive to romance, de Baca places the woman within a wider group, although she is typically portrayed as firmly within the family unit, whose main jobs were within the realm of domesticity. Instead of focusing on a lone female archetype to define an entire gender and race, de Baca highlights the group and its accomplishments: "...the use of collective voices...emphasizes a communal authority and voice, not an individual one. Her own voice is simply one that is shared in the collective experience. No

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[17] Richard W. Etulain, *Beyond the Missouri: The Story of the American West* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 385.

voice has more discursive authority than any other."[18] Her narratives "are glimmers of a life contrary to stereotypical images of Hispanas" that defy racist and sexist conventions by presenting women as smart, hardworking, wise, and harmonious - *and* from the low to middle classes.[19] While certainly idealistic at times, her recollections of Chicano/a life nevertheless worked against common depictions of the Chicana woman as a dark lady. Her women have pasts, histories, and memories, and are not stand-alone characters that serve as a punchline, sexual object, or plot point. Defying the sexualization of Chicana women in prejudicial literature written by men, de Baca's "...feminine discourse...is intimately tied into the portrayal of a female way of life, the work they do, and the traditions and rituals they hold dear."[20]

In her memoir *We Fed Them Cactus* (1954), de Baca describes Chicanas in an admiring way, lauding the strength and day-to-day hardiness that it took to survive the harsh desert climates of the southwest. In some ways, her recollections are so straightforward as to be completely devoid of sexual desire or agency (compared to Mena, who confronts sexuality up front); marriage and child-rearing are not seen as options but as standard behavior, though this did not lessen the crucial functions that the woman contributed:

> The *patrón* ruled the *rancho,* but his wife looked after the spiritual and physical welfare of the *empleados* and their families...She was a great social force in the community - more so than her husband. She held the purse strings, and thus she was able to do as she pleased in her charitable enterprises and to help those who might seek her assistance...The women in these isolated areas had to be resourceful in every way. They were their own doctors, dressmakers, tailors, and advisers.[21]

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[18] Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1995), 43.

[19] Rebolledo, 43.

[20] Rebolledo, 46.

[21] Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, *We Fed Them Cactus* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1954), 60.

de Baca refuses to downplay the impact the woman had on her family and community. Upholding typical gender roles while also attesting to their intelligence and adaptability, she gives a nuanced look at the reality of a woman's station and tellingly suggests that even though her husband "ruled," it was the woman who was the "great social force." She was a wife and mother, yes, but also a navigator of medicine and education. For women reading de Baca's work, this would come as no surprise; what makes *We Fed Them Cactus* revelatory is that it showed the entire country that *this* was a Chicana. She was not a whore or a halfbreed harlot, but a respected member of society that juggled many different responsibilities (and who potentially held more sway than her male relations). A brief mention of prostitution is alluded to, but the diction de Baca uses is particularly illuminating: there was a "...saloon and gambling house where [there was] a large clientele made up of men and women whom the law brands as outcasts. The saloon was open at all hours and it never lacked wine, women, and song."[22] It is not de Baca and her milieu that gives the label of "outcast" to these people, but the law. Further, it is men *and* women that are subtly licentious, not just women alone. Yet, de Baca isn't completely flawless; further down the page, these very women aren't given actual monikers, but moderately derogatory epithets: "...La Golondrina, the Swallow, and two [were] nicknamed Las Elefantas, the Elephants."[23] Multidimensionality is sandwiched between dismissal, but the overarching message is clear: women are strong, capable, and just as entitled to a voice as men.

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[22] de Baca, 98.

[23] de Baca, 98.

The Liberation: The Civil and Women's Rights Movements, 1954-1987

Because Chicanas are both female and of color, the dual revolutions of the civil and women's rights movements doubly benefitted them, although slowly and in spurts, and never easily. Broadly speaking, the work of black activists to achieve equality with whites in the U.S. was an effort that both inspired and coincided with the "brown power" movement; significantly, it was the work to politicize *Mexicanness* and the push to organize Mexican migrant workers that set off the emergence of a loud, proud Chicano/a literary progression.

> Chicano/a scholars have long argued the importance of the UFW [United Farm Workers] to the emergence of the Chicano/a Renaissance in the late 1960s. Chávez's championing of the plight of the migrant worker gave Chicanos/as, in urban and rural areas alike, a political sense of themselves as an ethnic, racial, and working-class people. In an era of social revolution, it was the role of Chicano/a artists and writers to reinforce UFW goals and create narratives that represented a broadly defined ethnic identity based on a shared embattled history in the United States. Fortified with an awakened political resolve to demand civil rights for people of Mexican descent, Chicano/a artist/activists ventured out in protest against the status quo.[24]

This was reflected in the new literatures that were beginning to be disseminated on a mass scale. The work that was being done in these decades - by men and women alike, of all races and ethnicities - was not ignored by publishing companies; indeed, the rigor of the activism (and the popular consensus it brought) of all people of color, including women, was met with acceptance (be it reluctant or not) by publishers who were willing to put into print the voices that had long been stifled during the preceding decades. Thus, the emergence of writers such as Carla Trujillo, Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Ana Castillo, and Lorna Dee Cervantes, among others, was a response to the avid protestation that more or less defined the 1960s and 1970s. The change here is almost undefinable: there is no fixed event or point in time in which book publishers began to

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[24] Aranda, 162-163.

remedy their lack of diversity, but the end result was an upsurge in which Chicanas were finally able to give voice to the selves that they knew had existed all along, but were never able to show the wider populace. With a self-awareness and acknowledgement of their own interiority - a symptom, too, of the women's rights movement and the encouragement to defy the patriarchy and the resulting stifling of outré female representations - these women had, with the help of millions of supporters in their corner, a medium with which to obliterate the dark lady altogether. What is most curious, however, is that the dark lady was not vanquished. She was embraced.

Sandra Cisneros: The "Wicked Woman" Reclaimed

Sexual desire and racial self-acceptance are two key themes that define the work of Sandra Ciseneros, a pioneer in Chicana literature and arguably one of the most notable figures in Mexican-American writing. With the advent of a more accepting environment in the late 20th century, Chicanas were given a platform with which to spin their own tales without the interference of white men, whose depictions of them had sullied their race and gender for decades. The sexually available Latina, whose legs were open for any man willing to claim her (regardless of her own will), became a thing of the past - or, at the very least, a depiction that was able to be argued against and counteracted. No longer was the male in charge of the way she was represented in literature; the days of westerns and pulp fictions had come and gone, and the women's rights movement as an entity marginalized the attempt to control or demonize the sexuality of a woman.[25] Cisneros embodies the new feminist Chicana literary trend that emerged during and after the civil and women's rights movements, whose "...work is characterized by the

[25] There is no attempt here to completely ignore the role men continue to have in defining women - especially women of color. There still exists an uphill battle in terms of representation, but for the purposes of this paper, the change from the early 1900s to the late 1900s is emphasized to make a point about how much progress has been made, rather than the climb that still continues to this day.

celebratory breaking of sexual taboos and trespassing across the restrictions that limits the lives and experiences of Chicanas."[26]

In *The House on Mango Street,* Cisneros's most famous novel, the female protagonist navigates the *inbetweenness* of Mexican-American life while tackling what it means to be coming of age in an urban, inhospitable environment. Cisneros confronts sexual violence in a way that had not yet been seen in Chicana literature; for (arguably) the first time, the man is held accountable for his actions. He is no longer the creator of a woman's characterization, but rather her defiler. This switch upends the notion of the dark lady: it is no longer the woman that is promiscuous, but rather the male, and her resistance and ambivalence towards his overtures is what makes the marked contrast to previous depictions so stunning. She is cast as a victim, yes, but also a reclaimer of her own sexual identity when she vocally dislikes sex with men and produces a psychological response to it. It is this cerebral approach to sexuality that defines her, rather than an acquiescence towards it (or a complete lack of decision-making, as in early novels). The fact that it is a woman that writes this story is a triumph of itself.

> Sally Sally a hundred times. Why didn't you hear me when I called? Why didn't you tell them to leave me alone? The one who grabbed my arm, he wouldn't let me go. He said I love you, Spanish girl, I love you, and pressed his sour mouth to mine. Sally, make him stop. I couldn't make them go away. I couldn't do anything but cry. I don't remember. It was dark. I don't remember. I don't remember. Please don't make me tell it all. Why don't you leave me alone?...Only his dirty fingernails against my skin, only his sour smell again. The moon that watched.[27]

The openness with which Cisneros voices the agony of sexual assault could not be more at odds with the depictions of womanhood seen in Mena and de Baca's writings. Before, even when the

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[26] Deborah Madsen, *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 105.

[27] Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1984), 100.

female was shown unconventionally (in the political sphere, perhaps, or engaging in a sense of her own self-worth), she was still bound by unconscious societal limitations. Further, the stream-of-consciousness style that is so particular to Cisneros is also an indicator of how much progress had been made; the women could only be portrayed so well in the first half of the century when the form itself was beholden to strict rules of grammar and syntax. The upheavals occurring in the later half of the 1900s had an impact on sentence structure as well, freeing the written word from such rules and thus allowing a higher level of self-reflection. It's not surprising, then, that so much Chicana literature comes in the form of poetry and magical realism, where sentences and ideas are more fluid and intuitive.

Closing out the last decade of the 20th century, "Loose Woman," a poem of staggering authority and moxie, is the ultimate indictment of patriarchy and racism which also fiercely claims the stereotypes of Mexican-American women - and women in general - that Cisneros fights against.

> They say I'm a bitch.
> Or witch. I've claimed
> the same and never winced...
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> They say I'm a macha, hell on wheels,
> viva-la-vulva, fire and brimstone,
> man-hating, devastating,
> boogey-woman lesbian.
> Not necessarily,
> but I like the compliment...
>
> By all accounts I am
> a danger to society.
> I'm Pancha Villa.
> I break laws,
> upset the natural order,
> anguish the Pope and make fathers cry.

I am beyond the jaw of law.
I'm la desperada, most-wanted public enemy.
My happy picture grinning from the wall...[28]

The writing is fearless, and by using the very words used against Chicanas, she takes control away from the white men that had been in charge of the images of the Mexican-American woman and repurposes them in the ultimate usurpation of sexism and racial prejudice. By unequivocally calling herself a "bitch...[that] upsets the natural order," Cisneros reverses the power that these words once had to discriminate and belittle. This could never have been possible without the nationwide move towards racial and sexual equality that occurred in the preceding decades - and, for that matter, without the contributions of women such as Mena and de Baca, who in their own small way began and perpetuated the heritage of Chicana outspokenness that Cisneros now carries on. The use of both English and Spanish phrases - and her alignment with Pancho Villa, one of the most enduring icons of the Mexican Revolution - shows her willingness to hybridize her Chicana status in writing. By combining both languages, and thus, both ethnicities, she acknowledges the importance of both to her identity and shows that it is possible to navigate the *inbetweenness* that often plagues Chicana writings. This subtle taking back of the halfbreed slur makes the poem even more remarkable, and demonstrates that white men are no longer the sole definers of Mexican-American womanhood. Cisneros "...is 'wicked' in that she has reappropriated [and] taken control of her own sexuality and the articulation of it."[29]

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[28] Sandra Cisneros, "Loose Woman" in *Loose Woman: Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

[29] Madsen, 119.

Backwards and Forwards

The timeline of the evolution of racial and sexual stereotypes of Mexican-American women - from the early 1900s to the end of the century - at first glance seems to be linear, moving from negative to positive as the years advance. In reality, however, the truth is much more complicated: stereotypes maintained at the same time as they were being counterattacked, and those that worked against the ugliness of the halfbreed harlot were never completely guiltless of perpetuating patriarchal viewpoints. Cause and effect were not always synchronized, and the gaps in the literary and historical record is a flummoxing, but altogether human, disjunct. Oxymoronically, images of the Chicana as a dark lady persisted long enough to be discredited *because* it took so long for them to be invalidated. Voiceless in the annals of literature while white men held the reins of their representational identities, Chicanas were treated as second-class citizens and therefore had no authority or opportunity to publish, and thus the racial and sexual stigma attached to their Otherness continued unabated. The system that villified them was the same system that kept them from protesting, and the complete shift in societal thinking that was necessary to undo this speaks to how ingrained these images were in American culture. The dark lady held sway in the collective consciousness because it was an easy stereotype to believe. Women and people of color were always at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and combining the two - with the added hurdle of a language barrier - yielded distressing results. America has never been at a loss for a scapegoat, and Chicanas felt the same wrath bestowed on them that many other groups have felt. In this, they are no different. What makes them so singular, however, is their ability to adapt and reclaim: the Mexican-American woman, rather than ignoring or

diminishing the dark lady stereotypes, took them back, making them something to be proud of rather than relegating them as a shameful relic of the past.

The future as an abstract is always promising, and it is disheartening to think of the coming decades as anything but positive for Chicana writers, but the heightened antipathy with which Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are treated in light of the continuing immigration and border crisis in American politics makes the time to come scarily uncertain. At many points in the present - as in the past - it feels as if society is constantly moving backwards and forwards at the same moment; this tug-of-war is mitigated, however, by the voices that remain in print. The pages of a book are capsules of resistance, and reminders of what came before - and what should be avoided. Whether the socio-political climate stays the same or changes, the women that respond to the conditions retain a place of permanence, solidifying their points of view in the country's literary history and carving out new spaces and identities all of their own making. The real dark ladies are the ones that move forward, regardless of circumstance.

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