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"Like the Strands of a Rebozo": Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* and Chicano Identity

Born in Chicago in 1954, from a Mexican father and a Mexican American mother, Sandra Cisneros has firmly established herself as the best-read U.S. Latina writer, with her prose works *The House on Mango Street* (1984), *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991) and *Caramelo* (2002), as well as poetry collections such as *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987) and *Loose Woman* (1994). Despite her success, the controversy raised ten years ago by her wealthy San Antonio neighbors about her house paint still remains one of the most representative episodes of her biography.

When in 1997 she was finally able to buy a house, paying for it with the money earned through her writing, she decided to paint it a vivid purple. It was a small Victorian cottage set in a very old and prestigious neighborhood, half a mile from the Alamo: the King William Historic District, founded in the middle of the 19th century by European immigrants. Because bright colors such as purple, green, red, orange and pink are typically used in Mexico, Cisneros felt her paint would be appropriate to celebrate the hybrid history of Texas, based on the encounter of Anglos and Latinos. The color, however, shocked her conservative neighbors, and the San Antonio Historic Design and Review Commission, aiming at protecting the original look of the area, declared her house paint "historically incorrect" and urged her to change it unless she wanted to pay a heavy fine. Calling attention to the lack of records regarding the poorer districts of the city and the entire Tejano community, Cisneros stated she would not back

down. "It's not about my house. It's about history" (Brackett 95), she affirmed when interviewed by the national media. The issue would not be resolved until October 1998, when the board requested that Cisneros bring in a sample of her house paint, to see how it had been altered by two years of Texan sunshine. Using a diplomatic approach, the Commission conceded that the color had faded to violet and was now an acceptable historic dye.

Though a decade has passed, her house-painting controversy still reflects the prominent traits of her personality, that is, her close bond to the symbols of her ethnic identity, her social commitment and her lively and sagacious character. All of these features are powerfully mirrored by the image of the *rebozo caramelo* we will encounter in her latest novel. Raised in a working-class barrio of Chicago as the only daughter among seven children, Cisneros has actually always been an ardent spokeswoman for the Chicano community, which she tries to depict in its rich and complex blend of Pre-Columbian, Mexican and North American cultures.

Ethnicity has been a dynamic and evolving presence in Cisneros's texts and public persona ever since the epiphany she experienced as a graduate student at the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1978, when she discovered her own distinctive voice, and the power deriving from her belonging to more than one culture. The differences that had in the past seemed a weakness, the cause of her isolation and dissatisfaction, now became her strength: because she had lived in poverty and had been trapped in a sort of cultural limbo, she knew things her classmates did not. Not only could she express her own experiences, but she could also represent her people, use her voice to echo their voices, transform their economic and ethnic marginalization into a creative device. Therefore, her readers would learn about the Chicano community and the lives of those who inhabit the intermediate space between the Mexican and the Anglo-American culture.

The short stories Cisneros began writing in Iowa were filled with the voices of her past and eventually evolved into her first and most famous book, *The House on Mango Street,* a feminist coming-of-age novel about a Chicana growing up in Chicago. As a child, Sandra had dreamed of being a success, of leaving her life in the *barrios* far behind. As a young woman, revisiting her past through her writing would bring her that success. She had to go back in order to move forward.

This restless movement back and forth in time and space becomes even more intense in *Caramelo,* an epic saga of a Mexican American family embracing four generations and covering a territory which ranges from Chicago to Mexico City. Written in nine years, it is the fruit of a long creative process interrupted by the sorrowful loss of Cisneros's father in 1997:

> I knew he was going to die when I was writing the book. … It was kind of a way to carry me through that rite of passage. … I didn't know what it was about when I began it. I was just trying to write about a memory I had of a trip to Acapulco. Everything else kind of mushroomed. I was interested in asking questions that so many of us ask as daughters that we aren't allowed to ask. I created this story to fill in gaps so that I could understand my father and write his history. (Newman 45)

The initial narrative about the car trip comes from a short story that never made it into *Woman Hollering Creek*. Soon after she had written it, Cisneros discovered that she had disturbed a world that resisted being confined and required a more systematic and extended treatment. Yet since the very beginning what has urged her to write was the wish to pay tribute to her father and to rescue from oblivion his immigrant generation. No American president seems to have acknowledged the Mexican-Americans' contribution to the building of the U.S., and despite his father's valor in World War Two and his lifelong industrious work as an

upholsterer, they were all doomed to forgetfulness: "I never saw an upholsterer in American literature" (Navarro 1).

However, *Caramelo* is neither a family memoir, nor an autobiography. Cisneros knew that gathering direct testimony from his relatives would be difficult. They would all sweeten reality and leave out several memories because of the typical Mexican mania for *quedar bien*, cutting a fine figure: "I knew too much about everybody. ... I kept branching off into other sub stories, other plots" (*Caramelo* 1). More than official history and the well-known family "healthy lies," Sandra prefers gossips, legends, rumors and half-truths she amplifies with her powerful imagination. Narrative detours and imbricated layers continue to evolve as she combines fiction, family lore and historical research to imaginatively recreate the milieu of her father's generation.

In fact, the novel starts with a Disclaimer which reverses the classic "None of the events and none of the people are based on real life," and confirms that most of the characters are inspired by genuine remembrances of her childhood. Yet the author freely reshapes her memories, as she frankly admits in the initial statement:

> The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my invention, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*. (n.p.n.)

The embroiderer of this story is Celaya Reyes, born, like Cisneros, in a working-class *barrio* of Chicago, in the middle of the Fifties. Lala, as she is called, is the seventh child and only daughter in a large Chicano family, continually crossing and recrossing the border between the U.S. and Mexico. As she unfolds the repressed secrets of her relatives, Lala mixes together past and present, carrying us from the mid-20th to the late 19th

century and forward again, in a restless move from Chicago to Mexico City and to San Antonio.

The story of the Reyeses is situated within both the broad sweep and the everyday minutiae of Mexican and North American history: Lala paints a large historic picture, but she also captures the trifles of everyday life, with a rich assortment of footnotes, songs, recipes, film commentaries and cameo appearances by famous people. This flamboyant representation is made even more vibrant by the language of the characters: a colorful fusion of English and Spanish forms, constantly recalling their hybrid origins and infusing the WASP reader with the immigrant's sense of dislocation.

As self-appointed family storyteller, Celaya's voice is the guiding thread throughout the 86 chapters of the novel. Therefore, her narration grows from the wondering tone of a little girl remembering her glamorous parents and exotic adventures, to the contentious voice of a teenager, teetering between two cultures, and finally to that of a young woman who has come to understand and forgive.

The first part of the novel is set in the early sixties and focuses on the Reyeses' annual summer trips from their hometown Chicago to Mexico City to visit their grandparents. Lala introduces her family to the reader with one of a long series of folkloristic vignettes: her father, Inocencio, and his two brothers racing in cars crammed with kids – a white Cadillac, a green Impala, and a red Chevy station wagon, the colors of the Mexican flag. Their long ride down the Route 66 ends in Destiny Street, just down the road of Tepayac, the hill where the Virgin of Guadalupe is told to have appeared to the Indian Juan Diego, with her mantle full of roses. Yet, the real matron of Destiny Street and the engine that powers the entire plot is the Awful Grandmother, who burns in love for her eldest son and rules the family dispensing withering criticism of everything: from other women's cooking, to her sons' inexplicable decision to live in the United States.

With her internal focus and her childish voice, Lala recollects an imaginary homeland, a romanticized nostalgic Mexico – as she acknowledges at the end of the novel: "a country I am homesick for, that doesn't exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there" (434). Her language, loaded with bright infantile images, onomatopoeias and repetitions, expresses Cisneros's witty and poetic voice at its best. After all, her writing has always stood out for this *child-voice* that she connects with the poet's tasks: "Los poetas nunca dejan de mirar el mundo con los ojos de un niño" (Salvucci 180).

In the second part of the book the narration jumps back to the twenties, where the Reyeses' lives are punctuated with historical accounts of the Mexican Revolution and of the following years of nation building and American control. Celaya is now a young woman and a shrewd observer, trying to reconstruct the adventures of her ancestors from a distance, with a more conscious and mature voice, as well as an extremely accurate lexicon. She takes us back to the childhood of her grandmother, Soledad, seeking clues of how she got to be so awful; at the same time, she investigates the life of his grandfather, Narciso, inexplicably catapulted to Chicago during the Roaring Twenties.

In the final chapters of the novel, Lala is a vulnerable and awkward teenager, becoming increasingly depressed and frustrated with the "Mexican-ness" of her family. The Reyeses, now owners of an upholstery business, move back and forth between Chicago and San Antonio, flitting through flea market and antique shops and nostalgically attending mouth-watering *toquerías* to have a taste of home. In a sort of initiation rite Lala has to cope with her multicultural heritage, experiencing both racism from the *Anglos* and hostility from the Chicanos. Her angst-ridden voice reflects the youthful vernacular of the early seventies, full of colloquial and colorful expressions which sometimes recreate the *pochos'* defects in pronunciation ("wha'chu wanna do about it, *pendeja*?") (*Caramelo* 354).

This intricate and non-linear plot seems to hinge on the last chapter. Although Celaya promises her dying father that she will not reveal the family secrets he has told her, she is compelled to tell the story of her family in what finally is the novel *Caramelo*.

Among the most remarkable and daring devices of the novel is the banter between the adult narrator and the voice of her old grandmother, who participates in the telling of the story and sometimes complains about the way it is told. At the beginning, Soledad pops in with little suggestions: "don't we need to see Narciso and me together more?" (201). As her granddaughter comes close to the obscure and painful sides of her life, she gets more and more exacerbated: "How you exaggerate!" (98); "Why do you constantly have to impose your filthy politics? Can't you just tell the facts?" (156); "Lies, lies. Nothing than lies from beginning to end" (189); "*sin memoria y sin vergüenza*" (205).

In chapter 25, she even takes over the narrative herself, playing as fast and loose with the threads of history and fiction as her granddaughter does. An illness caused by fright is woven into a brave wound during the Mexican civil war. Chronology is trimmed to bring a beloved baby into legitimacy. Eventually, the difference between truth and fantasy is neatly erased: "The less you tell me, the more I'll have to imagine. And the more I imagine, the easier it is for me to understand you" (205).

In the end Lala wrests back the control of the plot, insisting on her own ultimate authority over the narrative. After all, her role of family historian allows her to shuffle the cards of the storytelling without any restraint, freely inventing, polishing or concealing details to make the story more believable. She is also aware of an essential principle: there can never be a single story but as many stories as the people who tell it. Needless to say, her grandmother's ardent request for a faithful account of her life is completely ineffective: "It depends on whose truth you're talking about. The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it" (156).

The frequent intrusions of the narrator into the diegetic universe triggers a deep metaliterary reflection on the same act of telling stories. It wipes out any illusion of life-likeness, revealing the fictive frame of the text. At the same time, it involves the reader in a complex literary game, demanding his or her careful participation to resolve an uneasy question: why is the narrator laying all her narrative cards on the table?

Throughout the novel the reader has to face a continual dichotomy between *truth* and *story*, that is, between an act or event and the way it is remembered, related and interpreted. In some cases, facts are distorted by memory, which makes them resurface partially and vaguely. This happens, for instance, to Lala when she tries to recount episodes of her previous summer trip to Mexico: "Did I dream it or did someone tell me the story? I can't remember where the truth ends and the talk begins" (20); or to Awful Grandmother when she attempts to recollect some incredible experiences of the Mexican Revolution: "It was only later when she was near the end of her life that she began to doubt what she'd actually seen and what she'd embroidered over time, because after a while the embroidery seems real and the real seems embroidery" (135). In other cases, characters resort consciously to a story of their own, to reinvent a fact in accordance to their interests. This is what Celaya's father does with his famous healthy lies, always told to a good purpose: "It's not lying, Father says. – It's being polite. I only say what people like to hear. It makes them happy" (309).

Lala seems to judge these stories from an amused and participating perspective. In fact, she utters the most solemn and ironic healthy lie just at the end of the book, when she promises to her dying father that she will not reveal the family secrets he has told her. Actually, this same promise generates a contrary impulse: she is compelled to collect and mix all the stories of her relatives (both truthfully and fictitiously) in what is explicitly presented in the novel frontispiece as "puro cuento," pure invention. Paradoxically, if life itself is a kaleidoscope of tales,

partial views and discordant perceptions, only a novel entirely interwoven with stories and "lies" can reflect the multiplicity of human experience.

In fact, though the storyteller states she does not want to reproduce reality, throughout pages of *Caramelo* we discover such an amount of details, historical data, ethnographic information and diversified languages that we constantly get the opposite idea of veracity and reliability. A new question then arises: why is the narrator alternately asserting and discarding her credibility, as a sort of Penelope of the storytelling?

"For a story to be believable you have to have details" (124), Lala reminds her grandmother during their metaliterary dialogue; and *Caramelo* does not lack particulars. Its complex narrative fabric is actually thickened by an historic chronology and a long, well-constructed series of footnotes. Far from being standard lists of past events or classic explanatory glosses, these scholarly devices are transformed into strategic narrative tools, supporting the diegesis.

Many of the more than one hundred footnotes, for instance, are so elaborated that they can be considered authentic meta-narratives which adopt and extend most of the devices of the postmodernist novel. No wonder, then, that we find notes to notes, notes without a clear speaking voice, notes where the narrator addresses directly the reader, or notes ending with ambiguous remarks which demolish all their previous arguments. It is the case of the third gloss to chapter 50, dealing with an unexpected side of the Cuban dictator Fidel Castro: his early love for Gladys Junior. We learn that he used to write desperate love sonnets for her, *The Gladys Poems*, and to ask permission to her mother in order to gaze at her secretly while she was sleeping. His story is detailed and trustworthy, at least till the final sentence, when the narrating voice confesses her source, which is anything but reliable: "My friend's mother ... told me this story but made me promise never to tell anyone, which is why I am certain it must be true, or, at very least, somewhat true" (230).

The narrator is constantly raising doubts into the readers' minds, thus urging them not to take any truth for granted. At the same time, the text seems to redraw a new master narrative of U.S. and Mexican history which includes the experiences of the Chicano community, incorporating both its rich popular culture and its still unheard version of the facts:

> *Caramelo* was written with that intention of wanting to include the Mexican point of view of history. That, you know, was so important for me especially when I was listening to politicians like Bush talking about America and America. ... This made me have more *ánimo* to like this book and to tell details. In order so that my story could be stronger I put things like the chronology and the footnotes because I didn't want my story to get washed away as fiction. I really wanted people to see that what I was saying was based on facts. (Salvucci 186)

What most surprises and fascinates the reader is the amalgamation of official history and little-known events, news and gossips, eminent politicians and movie stars. The narrating voice mixes all of them in colorful, carnival-like descriptions, where everything reads like an explosion of kitsch. Mexican-American food, songs, dances, hairstyles and television shows alternate with vignettes of Latino icons such as the psychedelic shaman María Sabina and her magical mushrooms, puppeteer Señor Wences from *The Ed Sullivan Show* and Pánfila Palafox, a seductive wife-stealing actress. Not to mention the famous Mexican comic strip *La familia Burrón,* created by Gabriel Vargas in the forties, when comic books and *fotonovelas* (a hybrid of graphic novels and soap operas) were the only affordable readings for the masses. Because of its depiction of a lower middle-class family, living in the suburbs of Mexico City, *La familia Burrón* has been considered the antecedent of *The Simpsons.* Who would ever have said that Matt Groening's well-known yellow characters have Hispanic ancestors?

The real soul of Mexican popular culture is embodied in the omnipresent *telenovelas* and *fotonovelas*, beloved by the Reyeses and mockingly cited throughout the novel. In Uncle Old's house "[*f*]*otonovela* pages sufficed as toilet reading and toilet paper" (138); Awful Grandmother has always kept the best issues for his son, such as "Wives There Are Plenty, But Mothers – Only One" (63); the same narrating voice gives us instructions on how to become melodramatic actors: "Say any of the above, or say anything twice, slower and more dramatic the second time 'round, and it will sound like the dialogue of any *telenovela*" (15). The whole plot is ironically structured like a gigantic *telenovela* with its crises and sensational conflicts sustained for the longest possible time. Moreover, as Lala draws near to present, she also stresses the idea that life itself is a long soap opera, written by la *Divina Providencia* with more plot twists and somersaults than anyone would ever think believable. Once again real life and invention are inextricably intertwined:

> Imagine the unimaginable. Think of the most unbelievable thing that could happen and, believe me, Destiny will outdo you and come up with something even more unbelievable. Life's like that. My Got! What a *telenovela* our lives are!
>
> It's true. La Divina Providencia is the most imaginative writer. (428)

Basically, an entire submerged culture is brought to life and dignified through an ethnographic counter-narrative. This huge re-creation seems to hinge on the final chronology and on its radical change of perspective. The last five centuries of history are revised shifting attention to the outcasts and to all the people that still today "leave their homes and cross borders illegally" (439). This is why throughout the chronology Hernán Cortés, the Mayflower, the Great Depression, the Second World War and the 9-11 attack are placed side by side with alternative entries, such as the "Boy heroes" of Chapultepec, the birth of Francisco

Gabilondo Soler (the famous Mexican composer of children songs), the various Immigration Acts, Joseph M. Swing and his proposal to build a 150-mile-long fence along the border, the medals for bravery in the Vietnam war received by the Chicano soldiers, the march into Mexico City of subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas on behalf of indigenous rights, and many others.

Some historical episodes deliberately have two names, such as "The Mexican War. Or, the American War of Intervention, depending on your point of view" (435), or the street fights between *pachucos* and policemen in 1943, "The Los Angeles 'Zoot Suit Riots,' or 'Military Riots'" (437). Most interestingly, the last entry records the canonization of Juan Diego by Pope John Paul II. Be it a reparation for the Indians or a manoeuvre of spiritual marketing, it is meaningful that the Church sanctifies a person whose existence is not even certain. There are no historical proofs of Juan Diego's life, nor of the appearance of the Virgin he witnessed in the 16th century. Some state that it was simply a story told to the Indians in order to convert them from their devotion to Tonantzín, the Aztec fertility godness. In the end, Juan Diego's affair seems to confirm "the power of a good tale told well" (435).

Skilfully weaving history and stories, fiction and fact, ordinary and extraordinary, Cisneros manages to legitimate her ethnic past, giving a new dignity to the "minor" experience of the Chicano community. Either true or purely invented, her alternative documentation symbolizes the power of fiction to penetrate history, rescuing millions of lives from silence. After all, Cisneros's fictional enterprise is not far from Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, which reconstructs a 17th-century Italy where the great historical events of popes and sovereigns are interwoven with the voices of the humble ones, Renzo and Lucia. Nor is it distant from Forrest Gump's ambivalent location, in Robert Zemeckis' movie with the same title. Forrest is both central and marginal in North American contemporary history, just like Chicanos have

long been at the core of the U.S. economical structure and, at the same time, on the fringe of its socio-cultural sphere, concentrated in the lowest echelons of labor and deprived of their fundamental rights.

On the other hand, the continual mingling of truth and lies pushes the reader into an uncertain liminal space where he or she starts to doubt what is certain and to be certain of what is doubtful. Not only does Cisneros blur the borders between genres and techniques, she also undermines any fixed dichotomy, thus fostering a more complex reading of identities, races, languages and human relationships. She invites readers to question the ostensible objectivity of historical documents by coming to terms with the subjectivity and fictionality of such records.

At the same time she urges us to reflect on the power of writing. As we can infer from Lala's words in the metanarrative quarrel with her grandmother, the stories do not belong to their protagonists but to the ones who tell them exercising their conscious or unconscious hegemony on the object of writing: "your story *is* my story" (172). This is why the *conquistadores* wiped out the Indian culture, burning its texts and lowering an impenetrable cloak of silence over Central America. "We mistrusted writing anything down again" (López 90), Sandra admits, explaining why writing has remained a white prerogative for five centuries.

Despite Cisneros's undermining of the Anglo-American dominant point of view, *Caramelo* is not a pro-Mexico novel. The author is far from endorsing any binary ideological system and is always ready to portray idiosyncrasies and contradictions on both sides of the Río Grande. What she does is combining all of these quirks and inconsistencies in a mix of parody and participation, entertainment and melodrama.

Caramelo interconnects the Anglo and Latino universes from the very beginning. It is a novel in English, but its title is the Spanish name of a color. After the frontispiece the reader finds a Castilian

dedication ("Para ti, Papá"), then two white pages repeating the same isolated sentence, first in Spanish, then in English: "Cuéntame algo, aunque sea mentira"; "Tell me a story, even if it's a lie." Furthermore, a quick glance at the novel reveals a myriad of Spanish words in italics, scattered throughout the text. The author aims at recreating the hybrid sensibility of the Chicano community, with its peculiar way of blending idioms and redoubling cultural references in an original *patois*:

> For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their own identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves – a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages. (Anzaldúa 55)

Mexican Americans have not a single native idiom but a wide variety of codes and vernaculars ranging from standard English or Spanish, to highly mixed forms such as Tex-Mex, Spanglish and *Pachuco*. This complex "interlingualism" (Bruce-Novoa 50) revives at different levels in Cisneros's novel. First, through code-switching, the insertion of foreign untranslated words, not integrated into the base language, often figuring an originally Spanish utterance. Secondly, through several phonetic transcriptions which imitate the pronunciation of an Hispanic immigrant trying to speak English. Inocencio is the character that best expresses this device, as in the chapter entitled "Spic Spanish?" (*Caramelo* 208), dealing with his awkward attempts to learn English. Thirdly, through a series of Spanish calques or typically Mexican expressions, translated literally into English,

such as "What a barbarity!"(27) ("¡Qué barbaridad!"), "Not even if God commanded it! (67)" ("¡Ni que Dios lo mande!") o "It's the hour of the nap" (39) ("Es la hora de la siesta").

At a deeper level, the two languages are blended in such subtle fusions of grammar, syntax and cross-cultural allusions that monolingual readers will hardly notice. The author rejects the supposed need to maintain English and Spanish separate in exclusive codes and sees them as reservoir of primary material to be molded together according to the situational needs or the desired effects. As a matter of facts she outlines a third intricate language, in which neither monolingual code can stand alone and relate the same meaning – an hybrid speech which makes fruitless any effort of translation and generates a multiple mechanism of comprehension. The anglophone readers are actually pushed into a real "contact zone" (see Pratt), which forces them to decentralize their perspective and to continually make imaginative efforts to cope with unknown terms, odd mispronunciations and weird anomalies to the ordinary fluency of English.

Though purists of either language deny its viability, this literary multilingual cosmos vindicates the common speech of thousand of immigrants, while overthrowing the WASP, one-dimensional clichés about the Mexicans, abundantly depicted in films and literature as contemptible *banditos*, spouting "*vámonos*" or "*ayayay*." All the more so because the stereotypical image of the Hispanic as racially impure, lazy and mean has been strengthened in some recent borrowings, corresponding to Mock Spanish: "adaptations of Spanish-language expressions to registers of jocularity, irony and parody" (Hill 147). Words such as *siesta* or *mañana* to denote slothfulness, *enchilada* to refer to a messy set of things or *Hasta la vista, baby* – popularized in the movie *Terminator 2* – to dismiss someone despised or disliked. As these phrases are not direct and vulgar racist discourse, they are used by educated and uneducated English speakers who more or less unknowingly reproduce a negative attitude toward the U.S. *hispanohablantes*.

The highly asymmetrical relation of power between English and Spanish in North America has eventually led many Chicanos to lose their mother language. Since upward socio-economic mobility and full participation in the Anglo society require good proficiency in English, the second generations often tend to reject their cultural legacy in the vain hope of a quicker integration. As a result, many third generation immigrants inherit a frustrating sense of loss of their origins. "Mama raised me without language / I'm orphaned from my Spanish name / The words are foreign, stumbling on my tongue" (106), says Lorna Dee Cervantes, who would compare herself to a captive in a refugee ship that would never dock. Therefore, retaking one's own mother language becomes a precious possibility to drop anchor into the new port: to interact with the Anglo-American sphere, the Chicanos have first to dig into their past, reviving the Spanish language as the inner core of their ethnic roots. We will see this very process through Lala's experiences.

The author's conscious choice to preserve Spanish also brings to light a Mexican Americans' past made of prohibitions. In fact, despite the principles of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the Spanish language has remained strictly forbidden in public administrations and schools till the end of the sixties. Actually, only in 1968 did president Johnson passed the *Bilingual Education Act*, allowing the introduction of bilingual programmes of teaching for children with a poor mastery of English. The historian Vicki Ruiz records the Chicanos' discomfort through the emblematic witness of Rosa Guerrero whose efforts as an artist, educator, dancer and humanitarian enhanced her commitment to promoting cultural awareness, and eventually resulted in her developing the first intercultural programme within the El Paso Public schools in 1970:

> I remember being punished for speaking Spanish. ... porque yo sufrí unas cosas horribles. Yo no fui la única; fueron miles de gentes que sufrieron en Arizona, en Colorado, en Nuevo

> México, en Texas, en California; que nos estereotipaban horriblemente. "Don't you speak that ugly language, you are American now, you Mexican child." They degraded us horribly, pero uno se hacía valer. (Ruiz 226-227)

In *Caramelo*, there is an inverse ironic degradation of English, which Inocencio synthesizes in the old proverb: "Spanish was the language to speak to God and English the language to talk to dogs" (208). Even if the text is studded with tender references to the qualities of Spanish (its musicality, its polysemy, its delicacy and so on), it is not idealized. The author does not comply with Richard Rodríguez's bilingual dichotomy of *hard English* versus *soft Spanish* (Rodríguez 17) and satirically gives the role of fervent champion of the Spanish language to Awful Grandmother, who is not at all soft, poetic and romantic as the cliché of Castilian requires. Yet Soledad, who had defined her grandchildren a "generation of monkeys" (*Caramelo* 28) because of their horrible Americanized Spanish, ends up mentally recreating herself in a fictitious ad for the column "Flechazo" (285), which is, surprisingly, bilingual. Eventually, Cisneros herself witnesses her family's overturning of the traditional feminine and masculine attitudes regarding languages:

> Pero el español sigue siendo el idioma de la ternura, de mi niñez y del amor y eso porque mi padre fue un hombre muy tierno, muy dulce y cariñoso. Mi madre, al contrario, su primer idioma es inglés, venía de una clase obrera y además era una *tough cookie, you know?* una mujer muy fuerte. Hablaba el inglés de la *working class*, de los taxistas, de los obreros... yo creo que por eso se me pegó el inglés como idioma que uso para defenderme y el español quizás para ser *intimate,* tiernos, para hacer el amor, para pasear a mis perritos. Para mí tienen esa asociación, esa sensibilidad. Puede ser que para otras personas no sea así, puede ser todo lo contrario con tus

> padres, pero a mí me tocó un padre muy femenino y una madre muy masculina. (Salvucci 176)

In the end, through her peculiar use of code-mixing Cisneros is constantly amalgamating ordinary and literary discourses. Yet, far from being a mere mimetic act, her hybrid writing is a conscious creative process which overpasses social behaviors and creates a real "gioco bilingue" (Scannavini 14) – a bilingual game with extraordinary stylistic potentials. Her strategic fusion of what Gumperz has defined "we-code" versus "they-code" and her original use of artificial linguistic clichés shatter up the default order of writing. She thus manages to mold new spaces of expressions which break the automatism of perception and enrich all languages involved with a powerful intercultural tension. One of the greatest value of *Caramelo* resides in its power to shake off any fixed image of culture and to generate new discourses and alternative perspectives on the present days. This is why Cisneros's deliberate blending of codes becomes a fundamental aesthetic and political act. As a third generation immigrant, she resorts to a long series of hybrid Chicano icons, in a sort of reaction against the North American policy of the Melting Pot, forever trying to erase her Hispanic roots. She recovers symbols and traditions from her Mexican past, which she reinvents and remixes turning them into authentic "second-degree signifiers of ethnicity" (McCracken). This tendency appears in many aspects of her everyday life: her house paint, her folkloric dresses, the colorful interiors of her car or her syncretic spirituality. She even merges Buddhism and *guadalupismo* in a hybrid cult which is perfectly embodied by her arm tattoo called "Buddhalupe," representing the Virgin of Guadalupe in the lotus position.

The novel is also studded with Mexican pictures, redrawing a distant but not idealized motherland. Actually, even the most emblematic and reassuring elements of the Mexican spirit seem to hide an ambivalent meaning, both reinforcing and shattering the idea of ethnic purity. The front cover itself, for example,

introduces the spectacle of ethnicity with Edward Weston's photograph "Rose, Mexico" (1926), framed in a decorative flower-motif from a Mexican *retablo*. Evoking variations of the red, white and green of the Mexican flag, the artwork and the Spanish word "Caramelo" infuse the female image in the black-and-white photograph with a positive Hispanic halo.

Beside any aesthetic pleasure it may give, the picture reveals a significant detail: the photo is not flawless because the girl's eyes are closed, as if something were damaging her carelessness. The cover also takes on additional meanings in the context of the novel itself. The image of the smiling young woman alludes to the way grandmother Soledad might have looked in the twenties. Therefore, the narration has to tell what the photograph belies, that is, the complex vicissitudes that have changed a naïve and serene adolescent into the authoritative Awful Grandmother.

Similarly, the first chapter visually describes a souvenir sepia photograph taken during a trip to Acapulco. The narrator corrects the ostensibly accurate image of the past by noting that she herself has been left out of the photo – "It's as if I didn't exist. It's as if I'm the photographer" (*Caramelo* 4). The picture is again foreshadowing the narration. Like a photographer behind her camera, Lala will actually fix her family memoirs throughout the novel. Furthermore, another girl – Candelaria, whose caramel-colored skin is the first reference to the title of the book – is missing from the family picture. Her secret will be revealed only at the end, in genuine *telenovela* fashion.

The most powerful visual simulacrum is the *rebozo*, the typical hand-woven shawl of the Mexican tradition. In the novel, Lala inherits from her great-grandmother an unfinished candy-striped *rebozo caramelo*, which becomes a family heirloom and a treasured link to the Reyeses' past. It had first been a precious palliative for little Soledad, who used to suck it and stroke it in her bad times, and it continues to bring comfort both to Celaya and Inocencio who will wrap themselves in the *rebozo* in order to relieve their pains. Most fascinatingly, searching oral tradition as a skilful

ethnographer, Cisneros brings to light its elaborated manufacturing, its colorful fabrics and the habits that characterized it. A woman's *rebozo*, silk or cotton, plain or patterned, and how she wore, could actually tell her life's story to anyone able to decode its symbolism:

> Silk *rebozos* worn with the best dress – *de gala*, as they say. Cotton *rebozos* to carry a child, or to shoo away the flies. Devout *rebozos* to cover one's head with when entering church. Showy *rebozos* twisted and knotted in the hair with flowers and silver hair ornaments. The oldest, softest *rebozos* worn to bed. A *rebozo* as cradle, as umbrella or parasol, as basket when going to market, or modestly covering the blue-veined breast giving suck. (93-94)

In Soledad's time, *rebozos* were so widespread and so closely connected to Mexico and its customs that someone claimed they could serve as "the national flag" (93). Yet, digging into the past Sandra uncovers the hybrid origins of the *rebozo*. It first evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies; then it borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls; it was influenced by the silk Chinese embroideries exported by the Spanish galleons; and over the years it was slowly shaped by foreign influences. Moreover, the quintessential Mexican rebozo is the *rebozo de bolita*, whose spotted design imitates a snake-skin, an animal venerated by the Indians in pre-Columbian times. Rather than a national symbol, it seems the emblem of the hybrid substratum joining both the U.S. and Mexico. With its intricate pattern of caramel, licorice and vanilla stripes, Lala's *rebozo* actually alludes to the various shades of mixed-race skin colors, serving as a metaphor of incessant interbreeding.

Cisneros is portraying the Chicano multicultural cosmos in all its inclusive and incongruous nature. Her strategy produces hilarious and disturbing effects. For instance, when U.S. culture is filtered through a Mexican perspective, the observers end up

reproducing the same bipolar anthropological system used by the Anglo-Saxon settlers, that is, the tendency to relate common sense and reason to the viewer (the "colonizer"), while irrationality, instinct and exotic traits are connected with the anthropological object. Hence the repeated criticism to Northern American moral looseness; Awful Grandmother's indignation about her grandchildren's rough ways ("these children raised on the other side don't know enough to answer – *¿Mande Usted?* to their elders"); or Aunty Light-skin's excessive resentment against her ex-husband's proposal to remain friends: "Because that's how *los gringos* are, they don't have any morals. They all have dinner with each other's exes like it's nothing. 'That's because we're civilized,' a *turista* once explained to me. What a barbarity! Civilized? You call that civilized? Like dogs. Worse than dogs. If I caught my ex with his 'other,' I'd stab them both with a kitchen fork!" (273).

The reader is also struck by several cases of reversed racism. Lala often dwells upon the Mexicans' discrimination against the *Indios*, widely spread among both common people and the ruling class. Awful Grandmother insults Zoila, her daughter-in-law, crying out "Trash! Indian!" (86), and departs from a crowded bus station grumbling "Get me out of this inferno of Indians, it smells worse than a pigsty" (79). The government does not hesitate to route Indians and beggars from the downtown streets so as not to spoil the view, in occasion of the joined celebrations of Don Porfirio's birthday and Mexico's Independence Day. However, a "phalanx of Indians dressed as 'Indians'" (125) is allowed to take part in the Centennial parade, confirming that the ethnic other is acknowledged only if he or she complies with the false, simplistic clichés packaged by the hegemonic culture.

Furthermore, the narrator describes some relevant episodes of internal racism which dissolve any illusion of spontaneous sympathy among immigrants. In fact, the riots between second generation Chicanos and newcomers during a football match unexpectedly disclose the internal divisions of the Mexican

American community. When relating the accident to his jail fellow, Inocencio condenses the conflict with an ironic and biting sentence: "And the Mexicans from over here more American than anything, and us Mexicans from over there even more Mexican than Zapata" (217). Eventually, the absurd propensity of the immigrants to interiorize the dominant binary paradigm turns into a weapon against themselves.

As a matter of fact, since she became, in the late eighties, the first Latina writing about Chicano themes to receive a lucrative contract from a major publisher, the perceived expectations of her larger mainstream audience have begun to shape Cisneros's works. The ethnicity she deploys in her writing and her public persona combines "populist multiculturalism" with "hegemonic multiculturalism" (McCracken). She merges the claims of Chicano nationalism with the most common stereotypes about ethnic otherness. Yet the romanticized and reassuring folkloric images that embellish her narrative (the book cover, the *rebozo*, Mexico's invented Golden age…) enact only superficially the WASP audience's expectations. At a deeper level they let Cisneros recapture the eroding cultural memory and identity denied to the children of immigrants who have been raised in the United States.

At the same time, she questions the artificial figuration of a static and "pure" ethnic community, set in the previous decades by the Chicano Movement. She challenges its bipolar structure – *We* Chicanos versus *They* Anglos – and asserts her new hybrid identity, claiming legitimate residence between and beyond the poles. Throughout the novel, linguistic and cultural boundaries are actually turned into an open, productive frontier, which disrupts the comfortable distinctions of truth and lie, as well as the strategic dichotomy of self and other. Narrated within this liminal, erratic space, the comforting representation of the ethnic other changes into its opposite: it functions as "ethnic trouble" (McCracken), as source of uneasiness and anxiety about hybridism.

The Chicanos' changing, in-between identity seems to emphasize this feeling of disquiet. Since they have violated the forbidden boundary separating Mexico from the U.S., the Chicanos put into doubt the cultural fictions of inviolable unity and exclusivity. As a result, they are labeled as half-breed and their mere existence is considered an interference, a threat to both national identities. If Mexico depicts them as traitors, and prefers to force them to seek complete assimilation to the "enemy," from a U.S. perspective they represent a degeneration and a menace to its internal cohesion. Both sides tend to reject them, consigning their community to the rank of mongrels.

In *Caramelo* ethnic trouble is personified by the mysterious, exiled figure of Candelaria, the Indian servant child whose name incorporates Celaya's letters, thus prefiguring their blood tie. Even though Lala comes under her spell at first sight, the Reyeses inexplicably try to remove the little laundress from her. Awful Grandmother and Antonieta complain about her repugnant filthiness, while the only mention of her name gets on Zoila's nerves, after the episode of the trip to Acapulco. Candelaria seems to reveal the deepest unease of the Mexican people, that is, the awareness of their illegitimate and ambiguous origins. Their race is stained by the bloody vexation the Spanish *conquistadores* inflicted both on their lands and on the body of the Indian women. Octavio Paz traces this intimate Mexican perturbation to the taboo word *chingar* (Paz 18), meaning to injure, to penetrate brutally, to violate. The *Chingada* is thus the Indian mother, raped and humiliated by the European male, the *Gran Chingón*. If to the Spaniard the major dishonor is to be born of a woman who has willingly given herself (*hijo de puta*), to the Mexican the greatest shame is to be born of a woman who has been violated (*hijo de la Chingada*).

The *Malinche*, the Indian slave who was cruelly abandoned by Cortés after being his lover and his interpreter, is the key symbol of this historic abuse. The Mexicans cannot forget her betrayal (to the point that still today the word *malinchismo* denotes a guilty

xenophilia), but at the same time they believe she is a victim of power and project on her their feeling of self-pity. Accordingly, most Mexicans tend to reject both their Indian and their Spanish roots, thus becoming children to no one. The old relationship *Chingón/Chingada* comes back with a new patriarchal archetype: the U.S. supremacy, which exploits and scorns the Chicanos' mother-land.

Yet Inocencio, who sexually abuses the Indian Ámparo and does not acknowledge her daughter Candelaria, seems to replicate this abuse of power. Even if his tender and complete love for Lala partially erases both his guilt and the guilt of all the brutal abusers appearing in Cisneros's previous works, the shame of the perpetuated vexation still lacerates souls in *Caramelo*. Candelaria can therefore be seen as the missing link, the silent, hidden connection that no one perceives till Awful Grandmother uses her to her own advantage: to take her revenge on her daughter-in-law for having stolen "the great love of her life" (*Caramelo* 173), her firstborn Inocencio.

Although she mysteriously disappears with her mother in the village of Nayarit – "as if the earth swallowed them up" (79) – Celaya lets her re-emerge at the end, in the final imaginary parade, together with all the characters taking part in her family epic. Her reappearance is an active resistance to oblivion and a conscious acknowledgement of the hybrid matrix connecting the Reyeses, the country, and all the diverse cultural entities in the novel.

The anxiety about hybrid individuals allows us to draw an analogy between Candelaria and other disturbing figures of the female literary tradition. One of the most emblematic is Bertha, the Antiguan Creole created by Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre*. Because of her insanity and her feral appearance she seems to materialize both the patriarchal and the colonial violence endured by women over the centuries. Bertha is the victim of a greedy English colonial middle class, forcing her to marry in order to guarantee wealth and comfort to her husband. Once in England, she is confined in the hidden attic of Thornfiel Hall, in the vain

attempt to conceal her madness, her lasciviousness, her brutality, every sign which might reveal the failure of the colonial pedagogic and "civilizing" enterprise. Still, her animal traits (she is compared to a "clothed hyena") and her swollen face – "that purple face, those bloated features" (Brontë 328) – clash with the charming portrait Lala paints of Candelaria with her extraordinarily shining skin: "bright as a copper *veinte centavos* coin after you've sucked it. ... Smooth as peanut butter, deep as burnt-milk candy" (*Caramelo* 34). Here the perspective has changed and the observer is passionately sharing the ethnic otherness.

As a painful remembrance refusing to sink into forgetfulness, Candelaria reminds us of one of the most powerful metaphors of memory in Anglo-American literature: the ghost outlined in Toni Morrison's *Beloved.* The specter of the dear daughter, killed by her mother Sethe in order to save her from the cruelty of the "men without skin" (Morrison 211), is the symbol of slavery, as an harrowing recollection which should neither be erased, nor turned into an obsession. Writing fixes again a past soiled with abuses and vexations which seem to continue in the present, in racial discriminations, impassable frontiers, or imposed, one-sided visions of reality. A past to be reconstructed, untying its grievous knots:

> "I don't have women who are writers in my family," she says, spreading her arms as if to indicate not just her mother, aunts and grandmothers but all of Latin and American Literature. "Who are my antecedents?" Without such role models, without such guidance, she says she simply "imagined these women as weavers, and I am part of their tradition. Writing is like sewing together what I call these 'buttons,' these bits and pieces."
>
> The storyteller as weaver. The storyteller as a maker of *rebozos*. "I can't even sew a button," Cisneros says. "But I do with words what they did with cloth." (Weeks 57)

The whole novel is built on the basic metaphor connecting *rebozos* and storytelling, that is, the feminine skill of intertwining threads in precious and elaborated shawls and the art of telling stories, weaving different plots and lives in a single narrative. Cisneros does not have women antecedents in writing and imagines as her literary models the *reboceras*, who have been knotting for centuries the long wraps of the Indian and Mexican tradition. *Caramelo* can also be seen as a literary celebration of the *rebozo*: "Mexico's quintessential *mestizo* – or mixed – object" (*Caramelo* 54), as a tremendous emblem of writing and as work of art in itself. After all, its sophisticated weft seems to hold the age-old cultural stratifications binding races and civilizations, Old and New World, West and East.

As a result, through the strands of her *rebozo* Lala is able to reconstruct both a collective, Chicano identity – incorporated in the fluid progress of peoples – and an individual, female identity. She goes on a multidimensional journey: backward to her own remote origins, inward to the acknowledgment of her hybrid substratum, and forward to a constant redefinition of herself in U.S. society. Her route culminates in a final synthesis where differences and opposing forces are maintained and reconciled.

In fact, throughout the novel, readers will hardly perceive the clean Lotmanian division between the *IN*-space, or the space of *We* (internal and organized), and the *ES*-space, or the space of *They* (external, disorganized and unlimited) (see Lotman – Uspenskij 145-181). Since her childhood, when even English and Spanish appeared as indistinct amalgamations, Celaya does not fully distinguish the Anglo-American and the Mexican spheres as opposing, impassable spaces. On the contrary, she values both cultures differently, according to fortuitous circumstances and the material aspects of her life. This is why even the reassuring and picturesque Mexico City of her infancy becomes as dreary and menacing as the *barrios* of Chicago in her adolescence: "Downtown is changed from how I remember it, or could it be I remember it all wrong? Walls are dirtier, more crowded, graffiti

painted on buildings like in Chicago. Mexico City looks more like cities in the U.S., as if it suddenly got sick and tired of keeping itself clean" (*Caramelo* 259).

During Lala's stay in San Antonio, "out of the cold, and the stink, and the terror" (301) experienced in Chicago, her journey resembles Joseph Campbell's narrative paradigm of the hero's departure. According to this original scheme, the protagonist oversteps the border of the "other" world and passes several tests in order to get reintegrated in his or her society at a higher level: "a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell 30). But Celaya does not have a time-honored culture to strengthen, nor a homeland to become part of, and her initiatory experience eventually leads her to acknowledge her fluid, dynamic and interbreeding identity.

San Antonio represents the archetypal border city: "a town halfway between here and there, in the middle of nowhere" (*Caramelo* 380), where different cultural and linguistic systems collapse and regenerate one another. These dis-similar worlds seem to implode in Lala's mind, causing her a deep identity crisis after the beating up she gets from Cookie Cantú and her small group of quarrelsome Chicanas. If her Yankee classmates sneer at her for her non-Mexican traits – "Hey…, you Mexican? On both sides? ... You sure don't look Mexican" (352) –, the champions of *la Raza* go as far as hitting Lala for her presumed air of superiority and her Anglo way of speaking – "Think you're so smart because you talk like a white girl" (358). To get out of their clutches, Lala runs away aimlessly. Seized by panic and desperation she ends up crossing the interstate, one of the sharpest symbolic boundaries between the U.S. and the Mexican worlds. She gets through to the middle strip where the guardrails divide the traffic headed north, to downtown San Antonio, from the cars aimed toward the border. Frozen by fear and with her eyes full of tears, she stops dead in the middle of the road, "too scared to run across the three lanes of traffic headed south and

too scared to stay put" (357). When a mysterious voice calls her name – "Celaya. Somebody or something said my name. Not 'Lala,' not 'La'. My real name" (357) – she suddenly leaps off and sprints across the lanes till the exit ramp.

With her transversal movement she has cut off the umbilical cord drawing her to both sides. At the same time, she has pushed beyond both cultural systems, in a movement westwards which is inevitably connected to the North American exploration of the wilderness – for her, more than ever, an interior wilderness. In fact, after the crossing of the interstate she is no longer able to outline any *IN* space – "Home? Where's that? North? South? Mexico? San Antonio? Chicago? Where, father?" (380) – except for her body, her only certainty in the face of a destiny she cannot master:

> When I get back home, I lock myself in the bathroom, undress, and assess the damage, examining all the parts of myself that are bruised, or skinned, or throbbing.
>
> Celaya. I'm still my self. Still Celaya. Still alive. Sentenced to my life for however long God feels like laughing. (357)

Another crucial experience for Lala is her elopement to Mexico City, a further departure from San Antonio and, above all, from her family. When Ernesto, her beloved "good catholic Mexican Texican boy" (365), abandons her the day after their flight, the protagonist sinks into despair and loneliness. Then, she ties her *rebozo caramelo* on her head – "like a gypsy" (388) – and resumes her journey headed for Destiny Street, where she goes back to her grandmother's old house and visits the new basilica, built close to the old church. Glancing at the people surrounding her – beggars, welders, pilgrims, shoeshine boys, diplomats… – she makes out her pain projected on their faces and cheers up while realizing that the whole humanity seems to share her fate: "Everybody needs a lot" (389). It is at this very moment, in a sort of epiphany,

that Lala perceives the universe as a huge fabric of existential threads, knitted together as integral parts of a common pattern:

> I look up, and la Virgen looks down at me, and honest to God, this sounds like a lie, but it's true. The universe a cloth, and all humanity interwoven. Each and every person connected to me, and me connected to them, like the strands of a *rebozo*. Pull one string and the whole thing comes undone. Each person who comes into my life affecting the pattern, and me affecting theirs. (389)

This scene, crowded with meanings, is decisive for Lala's making of her identity. After having crossed the threshold of a bipolar cultural scheme of opposition, she shifts to a liminal space, experiencing a strong sense of uneasiness and instability. Celaya's in-between position turns her into a sort of exiled figure, with her ethnic traditions totally wiped out and no possibility of future self-fulfillment because of her gender. Actually, despite having endured the dreariness and lack of privacy of her house for years, when she asserts her rights to cut herself loose from her family and live alone her father rebukes her severely:

> – If you leave your father's house without a husband you're worse than a dog. You aren't my daughter. You aren't a Reyes. You hurt me just talking like this. If you leave alone you live like, and forgive me for saying this but it's true, *como una prostituta*. (359-360)

Lala has to deal with the historic *virgen/puta* dichotomy that forces the Chicana woman to comply with the traditional Catholic values of her community. According to this system, if she does not accomplish her essential family functions, such as the reproduction of the species or the transmission of established cultural values and beliefs to the next generations, she pays for any deviance with the brand of *mujer mala*:

> Culture is made by those in power – men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them.
>
> ...Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother – only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children. (Anzaldúa 16-17)

Through the experiences of Soledad and Lala, the narrator delineates an original female Mexican American history, starting from the first decades of the last century, to the present time. She often highlights the hypocrisy of her people, for instance when they say to the young Soledad "*cuídate*" (*Caramelo* 153), without even mentioning what she has on her mind because: "Then as now, the philosophy of sexual education for women was – the less said the better. So why did this same society throw rocks at her for what they deemed reckless behavior when their silence was equally reckless?" (156). The narrating voice also focuses on the sad role of ripe-age women, who lose their social functions and become "invisible" (347) because they no longer serve as mothers, nor as objects of desire.

Lala's elopement with Ernesto closely links her story to Soledad's adolescence. The protagonist runs away under the illusion of escaping her family's oppressive rules. However, she does not realize that she is emulating the same destiny of her grandmother, who had married a man not in love with her, out of ignorance and ingenuousness. Despite Lala's "sin," it is just the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, who shows her the universe as a piece of cloth, letting her be reconciled to the whole humanity and to her feminine essence. Moreover, another traditional Chicano figure emerges from the text: it is the mysterious *Llorona*. According to the legend her ghost is still crying restlessly for the loss of her children, whom she has killed herself. Together with the virgin, she seems to epitomize the

radical opposition of *mujer buena* versus *mujer mala*, converted into an ironic and modern relation.

Cisneros had already revised these mythological characters in *Women Hollering Creek,* where the weeping Felice transforms her howl of pain into a triumphal and mocking shout of joy, "like Tarzan" (55). In *Caramelo* it is Lala herself who is nicknamed *Llorona* for her bad habit – according to her mother – of complaining about everything without reason, as in front of their new house in San Antonio: "You were a *Llorona* when you were a baby, and you're still a *Llorona* now. Quit it!" (306). On the other hand, the appearance of the Madonna also represents a mocking allusion to the clichés of Chicano theater, where the virgin usually comes out in the third act to unravel the plot.

The connection between the "Virgen" of Guadalupe and the *Llorona* seems to recall the original unity of the pre-Columbian culture, based on a principle of balanced contraposition of sexes. The dualism of male and female, nature and nurture, light and darkness, life and death, were held and balanced by *Coatlicue*, the old Goddess of Creation containing different aspects, such as *Tonantsi, Tlazolteotl* e *Cihuacoatl.* With the coming of the belligerent Mexican-Aztec civilization *Coatlicue* lost her feminine essence, while during the Hispanic Conquest she was bereaved of her sexuality and identified with the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Middle-West Spain. From that time on a radical dichotomy was set between the new cult of the Madonna and the previous mythological figures, first of all the *Llorona* and the *Malinche*, demonized as real emblems of sin. In the eighties the Chicana feminists have proudly recovered these myths as symbols of their same torment, but in Lala's narration they appear silently and closely related to the Virgin of the Catholic tradition. This helps her rebuild an original equilibrium between tradition and personal aspirations, ethnic identity and female sensibility. Eventually she is getting near Ana Castillo's condition of *Xicana*, a woman who has become aware of her spirituality and creative force:

> Spirituality and institutionalized religion are not the same thing. Spirituality is an acutely personalized experience inherent in our ongoing existence. Throughout history, the further man moved away from his connection with woman as creatrix, the more spirituality was also disconnected from the human body. (Castillo 12)

After the epiphany in the basilica, Lala goes back to her hotel. During the night, the reassuring figure of the Virgin appears to her again in a dream, urging her to rely on her family whenever she has a hard time: "Always remember, Lala, the family comes first – *la familia*. Your friends aren't going to be there when you're in trouble" (390). The call for the affection of her loved ones recalls another fundamental scene, the final party for Inocencio and Zoila's wedding anniversary when, plunged in the general buzz of the ballroom, Lala is struck by a dreadful truth:

> It hits me at once, the terrible truth of it. I am the Awful Grandmother. For love of Father, I'd kill anyone who came near him to hurt him or make him sad. I've turned into her. And I see inside her heart, the Grandmother, who had been betrayed so many times she only loves her son. He loves her. And I love him. I have to find room inside my heart for her as well, because she holds him inside her heart like when she held him inside her womb, the clapper inside a bell. One can't be reached without touching the other. Him inside her, me inside him, like Chinese boxes, like Russian dolls, like an ocean full of waves, like the braided threads of a *rebozo*. *When I die then you'll realize how much I love you*. And we are all, like it or not, one and the same. (*Caramelo* 424-425)

Lala discovers the deep matrix of her existence: her indissoluble bond with her father, with her grandmother and with a long family tradition, rich in loves, races, flavors and music, all coming

back to life inside her. Yet, her heritage is not a burden but a precious embroidery she has to enrich in the present. As her life is closely connected to the destiny of the Chicano community and of the whole of humanity, she has to continue their great common pattern, she has to weave on the fringe of her *rebozo*.

This is why Awful Grandmother had started to haunt Celaya, in order to prevent her granddaughter from emulating her same errors: "Me? Haunting you? It's you, Celaya, who's haunting me. I can't bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life? Is that what you want? There's no sin in falling in love with your heart and with your body, but wait till you're old enough to love yourself first" (406). And this is why the same grandmother's spirit (trapped as San Antonio "between here and there. In the middle of nowhere!"; 406) will be able to reach her afterlife only if her granddaughter tells her story, inducing the people she had hurt to forgive her.

After all, Lala herself is caught in a cultural and generational limbo. She is immersed in a deep, disorienting border but she does have the possibility to carve out a new space for herself, where past and present, male and female, First and Third World, together with any other element of apparent conflict, could get mixed and renewed. Through a restless, fluctuating movement *au-delà* (Bhabha 1) – beyond these poles – she can actually bridge her Mexican legacy and her North American future, creating a Third Space (37), a protean, ambivalent identity. She basically recognizes herself as an active producer of interchange and synthesis, continually going beyond the *Anglo* and *Latino* spheres. Bruce-Novoa expresses precisely this cross-cultural position:

> we are neither, as we are not Mexican American. We are the space (not the hyphen) between the two, the intercultural *nothingness* of that space. ... We continually expand the space, pushing the two influences out and apart as we claim more area for our reality, while at the same time creating interlocking tensions that hold the two in relationship. In

> reality, there are not just two poles, but many. Neither Mexico nor the U.S.A. is monolithic. Each is pluricultural. Thus the synthesis is multiple and plurivalent, not bipolar at all. This means that we are not simply bicultural, but intercultural. (98)

It would therefore be misleading to think of a clear-cut division between two cultures, as there has never been a stiff bipolar system but an endless process of interbreeding and multidirectional oscillation. Plunged into this fluid magma Lala experiences Gloria Anzaldúa's *conciencia de la mestiza (*Anzaldúa 77), she becomes aware of her shifting, multifaceted identity, and transforms her marginalization into a precious means to uproot the dualistic split from our thinking – black/white, male/female, pure/impure. She moves away from any given pattern and unifying paradigm, while negotiating contradictions and cultural dissimilarities through a continual "Dialectic of Difference" (Saldívar 73-92). Cisneros herself has highlighted her continual attempt to be a product/producer of synthesis when inquired about the meaning of being a woman writer belonging to an ethnic minority and trying to find a balance between feminism and tradition:

> [N]osotras, las mujeres chicanas, hemos tenido que reinventarnos a nosotr[a]s mism[a]s, sin traicionar a nuestra cultura: tomando de la tradición elementos que nos pudiesen servir para sobrevivir, para desarrollar y dejando atrás los demás. Hemos tenido también que buscar en otras culturas, quizás para crear una nueva fusión.
>
> De hecho, cada uno busca su camino y lo inventa a su manera. (Salvucci 182)

Lala invents her path through her writing, the final act of definition of her new self. The *rebozo*, which always sustained her when in trouble, is again close to her in this crucial moment,

materializing her Pre-Columbian and Mexican substratum. Telling her life and the life of her ancestors Lala can give a meaning to the words *Mexican American*, she can weave through the narration the fringe her great-grandmother had left uncompleted, and she has the possibility to reconcile the experience of her antecedents, the *reboceras*, with her future as Chicana writer: "Maybe it's my job to separate the strands and knot the words together for everyone who can't say them, and make it all right in the end. This is what I'm thinking" (*Caramelo* 429).

The image of the threads, which are first separated and then meticulously interlaced, reminds us of how writing may create a subtle distance between author and text, to outline one's identity and otherness as well as to refigure the world. At the same time, the metaphor of the strands reveals the original notion of storytelling with its Greek root *–histo*, recalling the same idea of a fabric. If our stories are nothing more than bits of strings, pieces of cloth and oddments all embroidered together to make something new, then the world is really a "kerchief," as the Spanish saying goes ("¡El mundo es un pañuelo!"), and writing looks more and more like a huge loom, which is continually entwining truth and story:

> To write is to ask questions. It doesn't matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern: *Eres mi vida, Sueño Contigo Mi Amor, Suspiro Por Tí, Sólo Tú*. (n.p.n.)

The complex plot of the novel actually functions as a great *telar* weaving together different lives, centuries, accents and places in a vast, many-sided network. After all, storytelling brings to light the deep nature of human relationships; it makes us feel part of a huge, shared destiny which calls for solidarity, compassion and integration; it seems to require a plural and contrapuntal vision of reality which connects us all "like the strands of a *rebozo*" (389).

The shawl of the Mexican tradition, originally knitted by the Indian women, actually reveals with its vanilla, licorice and *caramelo* stripes the thousand shades of races and languages becoming more and more entangled inside us.

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