# BRUJA, CURANDERA, Y LECHUZA: Collapsing Borders and Fusing Images

Amanda Ellis

***Abstract:*** *Comparatively reading ire'ne lara silva's short story titled "tecolotl" from her 2013 collection* flesh to bone*, against Rudolfo Anaya's 1972 classic* Bless Me, Ultima*, this essay argues that lara silva collapses the distinctions between key literary and folkloric images. By fusing the bruja, curandera, and lechuza figures into one character, her short story engages Anaya's classic and creates an altogether new mythical and powerful figure. This mythical figure disrupts the binary distinction between bruja and curandera, it cautions against and emerges out of intra-communal heartache and underscores the irreducibility of Chicana complexity. Additionally, this essay goes on to illuminate the ways in which lara silva threads popular cultural expressions to score the dynamism of Chicana/o experience as rendered through contemporary Chicana feminist narrative.*

Chicana feminist writers often use their written work to imagine the meaning of identity and to describe the power of transformation across various genres. One such writer, ire'ne lara silva[1] weaves threads of canto, dicho, and mito folklorico (song, proverb, and folkloric myth) into her poetics, creating an alchemy of lyrical terror and wonder. Pushing fictively against the limits of realism, her short story "tecolotl" re-imagines the meaning of Chicana identity by investigating what it means to be human. Through a close Chicana feminist reading of ire'ne lara silva's "tecolotl" from her 2013 debut collection *flesh to bone*, I show how lara silva de(forms) images from a Chicano Movement era novel and draws from popular culture to craft her short story. By sampling popular conjunto song lyrics, incorporating Mexican dicho (proverbial saying), and invoking folkloric myths, she elaborates upon and revises conventional literary images and captures the vernacular soundscapes of contemporary

Chicana/o experience. lara silva blends realist aesthetics with moments of magical realism to showcase radical transformation as a central mediating force in her Chicana feminist prose. Using a realist story whose plot irrupts to showcase the idea of human to animal metamorphosis, lara silva conceptually and allegorically binds radical "otherness" to identity in ways that resonate with and deconstruct the bruja/curandera divide operative within Mexican American literature. By comparatively analyzing "tecolotl" for how it engages and subverts aspects of Rudolfo Anaya's 1972 classic Bless Me, Ultima, this essay asserts that lara silva's short story reconfigures the trope of the bruja (witch) by blurring it with the curandera (healer) and lechuza (owl woman). Through this fusion, lara silva collapses and refuses the distinctions between these three common archetypal images, and creatively re-members these female images into one character to signal the complexity of Chicana identity. Ultimately, lara silva constructs a radical Chicana feminist literary realm blurring realism, folklore, sound, and the fantastic. This literary realm upends the logic which conceptualizes Chicana identity as essential, uniform, static, or stable. She effectively complicates and revises the way these images are traditionally depicted by creating a world marked by species blending and radical fusions that emphasize the fluidity of identity and the power of radical transformation. She does so by collapsing the distinctions between key images—the lechuza, bruja, and curandera—and by incorporating canto, dicho, and mito folklorico. In essence, lara silva re-members and culturally grounds a new mythical story of Chicana women as a means of definition and transformation.

**Anaya's Owl**

*Bless Me, Ultima*, (1972) is one of few Chicano novels to receive a "European-wide diffusion"[2] (Geweke 2013, 112). It is read by some critics as one of the many important written works within the Mexican-American literary corpus

to date and was awarded the second Quinto Sol Literary Prize in 1972. This award commemorated Anaya's contribution to literary nationalism and led to his wide (albeit androcentric) recognition as one of Chicana/o literature's "Big Three"[3] (Bruce-Novoa 1990, 135). His unique bildungsroman dubbed "a masterpiece of the margins" details the relationship between a young seven-year-old boy named Antonio Márez and an elderly curandera named Ultima[4] (Kanoza 1999, 160). The novel imagines a boy's coming of age, illuminating how he learns to navigate the contradictions of his youth in New Mexico during the World War II era. Antonio, who struggles to figure out who he is and what he believes, is aided by the wisdom, love, and guidance of a communal folk healer. Ultima is a "curandera, a woman who knew the herbs and remedies of the ancients, a miracle-worker who could heal the sick" and Antonio was her apprentice (Anaya 1972, 4).

Ultima's depiction as the "miracle worker," quite literally domesticates the figure of the traditional healer of Mexican origin in the U.S. popular imaginary because Anaya distinguishes Ultima from a witch. Invested in depicting her as an ideal, he plays off the fact that traditional folk healers are often understood through the bruja/curandera dichotomy wherein curanderas risk persecution as witches. As Irene Lara[5] notes, brujas are a threat because they "symbolize power outside of patriarchy's control" (Lara 2005, 12). Outside of the text, curanderas have historically been vilified and subjected to lethal force throughout the U.S. Southwest. However, Ultima cannot be written off as she is a key matriarchal figure in the Márez home. Though Anaya's depiction of Ultima at times borders on fictional hagiography reifying the bruja/curandera binary because he depicts her as a highly revered figure, Ultima is like all women. She too, risks being ostracized should she fail to adhere to gendered societal codes. Despite her power to arbitrate matters of wellness in the community, Ultima is bound with bent knees to the altar in

the Márez home when she isn't undertaking communal healing practices outdoors. Of crucial importance to the novel is that she is a chaste "preserver and perpetuator of patriarchal authority" (Romero and Harris 2005, xii). lara silva explains that this piousness rests on an "insidious dichotomy [that] pits the traditionally religious mestiza woman against the superstitious, demonized native woman" (Lara 2008, 99). Unlike brujas, curanderas are deeply respected for their ability to heal, but (like all women) they are still subject to being accused of being brujas, dubbed evil, and persecuted because of their gender, autonomy, knowledge, and power. Consequently, Anaya's novel does much to authenticate Ultima as a "good" woman and not an evil bruja like the Trementina daughters who dance around a fire undertaking witchcraft rituals. Simply put, conventional narratives often invest in framing curanderas as benign and benevolent women on the good end of the bruja/curandera dichotomy. As the "midwife for the region as well as the nurturer of Antonio's manhood" Ultima is prescribed by cultural nationalism (Romero and Harris 2005, xii).

Departing from the binary logic undergirding gendered ethno-national aesthetics' characterization of the curandera figure, Chicana feminist Ana Castillo points out in "Brujas y Curanderas: A Lived Spirituality" that a woman (like Ultima or any woman) who cultivates well-being is often maligned contemptuously because of her power to heal. For this reason, Castillo underscores curanderas' communal significance and skill-sets. She notes:

> Curanderas may…be categorized according to their particular knowledge, for example: sobaderas, those who give massages; yerberas who are experts in herbs; and parteras, midwives. A curandera may be an expert in any combination or all these healing aspects. She usually demonstrates a gift for healing at a very young age and by the time

> she is a woman, she is recognized by her community as a curandera. (Castillo 1994, 156)

Recognized repositories of cultural knowledge, curanderas are central to communities. However, Ultima's importance hinges on the fact that she is not to be read as a bruja but rather as a healer who imparts valuable oral history and teaches Antonio about healing through herbal lore.

In complete ideological contrast to the dichotomous framing of a good curandera as distinct from an evil bruja, Chicana feminist Ana Castillo notes: "A curandera *and a bruja* [emphasis added] should be seen as a specialized human resource…brujas, curanderas, or healing women are just that, trained specialists" (Castillo 1994, 158). Chicana feminists who recognize the history and complex ideological terrain tempered by a misogyny that flattens out and divisively plots curanderas and brujas on distinctly opposing ends of the same continuum, deconstruct the extreme polarization and restrictive binary frame reflected in conventional depictions. Many Chicana feminists challenge the unfair disparagement of brujas by underscoring female power and rejecting the patriarchal demonization of women.[6] Noting the asymmetrical gendered distinction between brujos and brujas Castillo writes, "In Mexican culture, a brujo is someone to fear and revere while a bruja is someone to hate to the point of killing if at all possible. However, I claim this term for women who are in tune with their psyches, allow their lives to be informed by them, and offer their intuitive gifts to their communities without fear of being seen as loathsome or mad" (Castillo 1995, 157).

Anaya's novel represents brujas as evil beings. Brujas are depicted around chaparral fires holding masses for the devil. In contrast with the conventional bruja, Ultima, the moral, chaste, and maternal curandera—a living venerated

saint within the Márez home—is "una mujer que no [habia] pecado" (Anaya 1972, 33). Importantly, Chicana feminists critique this conventional bruja discourse. As Irene Lara notes, "The common belief that brujas are essentially mujeres malas (evil women), or conversely, that mujeres malas are essentially brujas, is a deconocimiento rooted in patriarchal western thought" (Lara 2015, 13-14). ire'ne lara silva, like Castillo and Lara, disrupt the dualistic distinction between bruja and curandera by unveiling the gendered dimensions of power that undergird the bruja/curandera binary, given that androcentric relations of power perpetuate the fear of women who "retain or reinstate [their] insights and connections with all living things" (Castillo 1995, 157).

Hovering in flight over Anaya's Ultima is an owl who protects her spirit, shadows Ultima, and is sent to watch over Antonio. The connection between Ultima and her owl, infuses folkloric mystery into the novel given that owls are typically associated with evil in Mexican folklore. Hence, the inclusion of the owl figure—with all its folkloric residual meanings—by Anaya does not inaugurate the owl into Mexican American culture, but rather, it imports the figure of the owl and its folkloric meanings into Chicana/o movement era literature in a way that subtly sanitizes the owl's meaning. In a climactic scene that symbolically captures the struggle between good and evil, Ultima's owl is shot, and Ultima dies—revealing the profound connection between Ultima and her owl. At the novel's conclusion, Antonio performs final burial rites. One funeral lays to rest Ultima's human body, empty of power, and another Ultima's owl avatar, confirming their intimate, if not synonymic, connection and the fact that the owl was fundamentally good.

**lara silva's Paloma**

South Texas Chicana contemporary feminist borderlands writer ire'ne lara silva is a creative force to be reckoned with. Her works include a 2013

collection of short stories titled *flesh to bone*, a 2016 edited volume of poetry titled *Imaniman: Poets Writing in the Anzaldúan Borderlands*, and two single authored collections of poetry: *blood sugar canto* (2016), and *cuicacalli: house of song* (2019). "tecolotl" centers on broken promises, love lost, and transformation. This coming of age story encodes the mythical owl image and focuses on a woman who learns the true power of transformation. In lara silva's story, a young woman learns of her ability to metamorphose into a lechuza (owl woman). In Mexican American folklore, "Witches often take the form of an owl, in New Mexican Spanish called a tecolote, from the Nahuatl word teolotl…In other parts of the Southwest owls are sometimes known as lechuzas. A lechuza is a woman who has sold her soul to the devil and becomes an owl by night. Only a woman can become a *lechuza*" (Castro 2001, 26-27). The lechuza women in lara silva's story are Chicana women who have been wronged. They are women at the center of broken promises and magical realist transformation, who harness the power of human emotion to metamorphose into flight and out of suffering. Unlike Anaya's novel, whose plot eclipses the link between Ultima and her owl until the final pages of the novel, the owl imagery both names lara silva's story and permeates each page.

ire'ne lara silva seizes the image of the owl, which remains imbued with folkloric meaning, and amplifies the owl's power through her narrative. This signals her position amongst a robust corpus of Chicana feminist critical and creative writers, whose written works make legible and deconstruct male power. This body of writers is guided by a shared rhetorical impulse to rewrite myths and legends including (but not limited to) Gloria Anazaldúa, Norma Alarcón, Cherríe Moraga Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, María Helena Viramontes, María Herrera Sobek, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Emma Perez, Catriona Rueda Esquibel, and Irene Lara.[7] In this discursive rebirthing of figures (such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Llorona, La Malinche, etc.)

imagined within "Chicana literary production, the presence of Mexican folklore demonstrates a symbolic re-membering, resurrection and return" to the folk base of the archive (Martínez 2011, 217). This creative maneuver of re-membering is what Rita Cano Alcalá dubs the movement "from chingada to chingona" (Alcalá 2001, 49).

"tecolotl" showcases creatures not entirely bound by the human body, nor the literary productions of the past that foment constricting patriarchal figures. It opens as the central character Paloma recounts her childhood memories and describes her profound bond with her Tía. Paloma asserts that her "favorite game was playing *tecolotl* with [her] Tía" (lara silva 2013, 78). Through child's play, her beloved Tía prompts her on many occasions to become her wings and to imagine herself in flight. Paloma would, "climb up trees and roofs, anything that brought [her] closer to the sky. [She'd] imagine …wings, imagine [herself] lighter than air, but [her] body resisted (lara silva 2013, 77). When her body would fall to the ground "Tía would run to pick [her] up after [she] had fallen. She'd kiss [her] bruises and cuddle [her] in her arms. Tell her [she'd] almost flown, almost remembered (lara silva 2013, 77). As the story unfolds, Paloma makes her Tía a promise. She vows to love her Tía best. However, Paloma and her Tía abruptly part ways and, unwittingly, Paloma breaks her promise. Years later, away at college in the Northeast, Paloma falls in love with someone like her, a Chicano from the Southwest from a family of migrant farmers. In a clearly karmic betrayal, her boyfriend cheats on her with her friend Iliana, breaking all the promises he made to Paloma.

Before betraying her, Paloma and her boyfriend make love, and this transforms her body. She makes note of how her "face flared, suddenly heart-shaped against [his] neck as [her] eyes darkened, [her] beak pushing into the seed-filled silt of [his] hair" amidst the throes of passion (lara silva 2013, 82). Profound human

emotions, romantic agony, and irreconcilable conflicts catalyze the animal imagery in lara silva's short story. Be it pure eros, ecstasy, or wrath, intense emotions animate the theme of metamorphoses. Paloma's love for her boyfriend stirs up the force that ontologically blurs her human form into that of an owl, and also lamentably results in other seismically transformative (though realistic and utterly familiar) experiences shared by women: unplanned pregnancy, miscarriage, betrayal, and heartbreak at the hands of one's first love. In equal parts realism and fantastical magic, lara silva arrests the owl image at the center of this story. The intense freight of emotional turmoil resulting from the end of the relationship amounts to a transformational crisis. It is here at the apex of her heartache and betrayal that Paloma's long lost Tía returns in owl form. She reminds Paloma of her broken promise to love her best, and helps Paloma remember her ability to fully transform into a lechuza (owl woman). The capacity to metamorphose, which Tía sought to cultivate within Paloma as a child, develops through her pain as an adult.

Counterintuitively, indescribable pain itself sets Paloma up to seek out a new kind of freedom and identity she must fashion for herself. Becoming a new creature enables her to lift out of her profound suffering into vengeance and figurative flight. What I wish to highlight here is not simply that lara silva's story engages aspects of Anaya's novel, but rather that her Chicana feminist production encodes elaborate moments of magic fused with narrative realism even as it blends, revises and refashions recognizable images. These images circulate through Mexican American folklore and are identifiable across numerous texts that make up the Mexican American literary corpus—Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* serving as merely one key (albeit widely-read) example. lara silva's unique revisionist reworking of the bruja, curandera, and lechuza images at the level of literary form underscore the story's theme of transformation. As Paloma's wings unfurl, lara silva's story also beautifully bursts open a magical realm that is grounded in folklore; a world calibrated

to reach beyond the limits of realism. In line with Chicana feminist Alicia Gaspar de Alba's call to "unframe the lives of bad women," lara silva's story revises notions of "bad women" by deconstructing the borders and binaries between gendered images and troubling the deep-seated vilification of women (Gaspar de Alba 2014, 201).

**Narrative Alchemy & Contemporary Myth-Making**

"tecolotl" illuminates women who break free from the constrictions of the human body, from traditional representations of key folkloric images, from the restrictions of the realist form, and from constrictive definitions of cultural/national belonging. Fashioning a new myth that radically blends bruja, curandera, and lechuza, lara silva achieves a fusion by collapsing the rigid boundaries demarcating distinctions between these traditional folkloric figures. She merges images, creating a new alchemy of figures in her artistic project—figures that are complexly recalibrated to index and produce narrative knowledge regarding the complexity of contemporary Chicana feminist life.[8] Notably, Paloma recalls a night when she was a little girl, and she saw her beloved Tía in a sinister fireside ritual. Paloma confesses, "I stepped carefully, trying to avoid the thorned weeds. I heard Tía's voice, speaking in a guttural tongue. I came closer to the flickering light. I could see everything. I saw her standing next to the fire. Her hair wild, her eyes wild, her rough hands bloody and blood running down her arms. She was chanting as she stepped into the fire. But she didn't burn" (lara silva 2013, 80).

Her beloved Tía, who unlocks Paloma's ability to transform out of her suffering human body, is mysteriously enthralled in a foreboding midnight ritual; however, Paloma attaches no stigma to Tía. She remains the best-loved Tía, though lara silva signals to readers through the fireside dance that Tía is also a bruja. Tía's irreducible complexity—although overwhelming—does not cause Paloma to hate. In fact, Paloma asserts: "…my Tía was everything to me. Family and playmate, teacher and nurse. She was my mother's dark-

skinned half-sister, never married, without children, poor and illiterate. She cooked and cleaned for my parents, working for her room and board" (lara silva 2013, 79). In this way, lara silva deploys the fireside bruja dance, and uses the image of the bruja to underscore that Tía is not simply evil and sinister and therefore abject, but is in fact a complex character. Tía is a true source of love for Paloma, and she is marginalized and societally scorned. Tía is the spinster misfit figure, the "bad woman"[9] with limited economic power described as the "dark-skinned half-sister" and the means by which lara silva effectively fuses the bruja figure with the figure of the beloved healer and owl.

Paloma's Tía is a witch, but she is also a caretaker and mother figure. She is a borderlands woman whose identity cannot be flattened out or reduced as evil or good. She can effectively be read as what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as an atravesada: "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead, in short those who cross over, or go through the confines of the normal" (Anzaldúa 1987, 25). Not simply a sinister bruja, Tía is an unruly woman, a lechuza woman, and she is also a trained healing specialist, ready to equip Paloma with the ability to remember how to transform and fly. Following in the tradition of Chicana feminists writing in the post-Anzaldúan borderlands, her story gathers "together the fractured self [and transcends] the ideologies that divide us" (Rebolledo 2006, 280-281).

After Paloma is abandoned by her lover, Tía finally returns and gives Paloma all she needs to carry out revenge. Tía gives Paloma a pouch full of magical healing herbs to wear around her neck in similar fashion to the way Ultima gifts Antonio a "small pouch of helpful herbs" to "keep [him] safe" to wear for protection (Anaya 1972, 124). Tía teaches Paloma how to turn into an owl at will, providing her with all she needs to kill her ex and his new lover Iliana.

Having taught her how to bring forth her owl wings (which are magically tucked away on her back) "Paloma spent the day flowing from one form to another. Woman to owl, owl to woman. Watching [her] wings extend and feather, fold and disappear" (lara silva 2013, 92). It is here, that Paloma's Tía confesses the unthinkable. She admits that she took Paloma's unborn baby and orchestrated her miscarriage in a jealous rage, because Paloma had broken her promise to love her Tía best. Tía then tells Paloma to resurrect her baby, she must kill her ex and his new girlfriend, too. Equipped with the ability to shape shift her human form into an owl, Paloma turns into a lechuza and converts her forlorn emptiness, heart break, loss, betrayal and complete despair caused by those she loves into wrath and revenge and confronts her ex-lover in an act of destruction.

But even as Tía devises a revenge plot, "Tía came to [her], speaking words and pouring smoke over [her]. [She] felt her fingers smooth a dark oil above [her] eyes from [her] chin to [her] breast. She fastened a length of thin leather around [her] neck, leaving two tiny pouches heavy against [her] chest" (lara silva 2013, 92). Tía is a fusion of three common images: bruja, curandera, and lechuza. She is a robust and complex character equipped with the ability to cause harm, lift into flight, and as a curandera she also has the power and conduct limpias (cleansing rituals).[10] Through Tía, a figure that unhinges the tidy distinctions between bruja and curandera (and lechuza), lara silva underscores the dangers of romanticizing our relationships with the people we love precisely because the people we love maintain the ability to hurt us.

In the revenge battle scene between Paloma and her ex, Paloma's ex shoots her in self-defense, and tries to leave Paloma for dead. Unlike Ultima who dies when her owl is shot, Paloma is shot in full-feathered lechuza form, and she "pulled one of the pouches from around [her] neck and placed it inside

the second wound" (lara silva 2013, 94). Thus, Paloma heals herself with the medicinal pouch filled with herbs that her Tía gave her. Ergo, lara silva creates a character that is neither simply curandera, nor simply bruja, nor lechuza, but instead a tripartite shapeshifter, and so is Paloma. She, too, is equally multi-faceted, unbound, and fluid. After using the first herb pouch, Paloma, now a super-natural lechuza, quickly pounces on her ex-boyfriend to violently finish him off. She notes,

> Before you could draw another breath, I stood. You looked down at your wound, pressing on it to slow the bleeding. I pulled off the second and heavier pouch and swallowed it. I felt it burst inside me and I became complete. Became fully formed. Became tecolotl. My mouth opened. My wings opened. No longer human. (lara silva 2013, 97)

Paloma metamorphoses into an owl woman and enacts her revenge by killing her ex. She chooses to destroy him and self-destruct her human form by transforming into a lechuza, saving herself from the anguish of betrayal. Paloma recovers the child taken by her Tía and creates a new sense of home and belonging elsewhere.

The destruction of intimate bonds and promises, and the agony of self-destruction and transformation are key topics within "tecolotl." Lyn Di Lorio Sandín and Richard Perez call attention to explosive moments of magic infused in contemporary U.S. ethnic fiction. Referring to these kinds of moments as an *irruption*, drawing from Glissant, they posit the following: "For pent up within the realism of a narrative is a traumatic kernel that effectively curves the space of fictional description and tears at the very fabric of its form to reveal a series of identificatory, social, and historical meanings released through a seismic irruption and interruption, providing a deeper

understanding of violence otherwise covered over, contained, repressed, or dismissed" (Lorio and Perez 2012, 3).

Paloma metamorphoses into the very being that can put an end to her own incomprehensible despair. She uses her resources to self-destruct and transform. Suffering here is figured through the rejection, betrayal, and subsequent emotional trauma that occurs with/in a Chicana's most intimate relationships. lara silva, then, takes heed of Chicana feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, Irene Lara, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and countless others who represent the unseen, unspoken, ineffable, outcast and/or tortuous. In doing so, she recalibrates the common images often underwritten by misogyny within the Mexican American literary and folkloric imaginary and gives voice to the unspeakable pain of intra-communal betrayal, shining light on what it means to experience pain at the hands of the ones we love. For lara silva, radical transformation out of suffering is still possible because Paloma and Tía both retained the ability to make something of their despair. They fly away from the intimate relationships and the very sense of community and belonging they may have otherwise thought to be unshakeable. The women in lara silva's narrative do not wallow, overcome by extreme dejection, nor are they paralyzed by the hardships they confront. Through unexpected transformational crises Tía and Paloma are Chicanas who fearlessly confront the sources of their pain and take flight. These women wound and are wounded. They determine if they will destroy themselves or others. They deal openly with what would otherwise remain hidden. By destroying their human forms and magically metamorphosing into beings that are out of this world and that are equal parts lechuza, bruja and curandera, lara silva attests to the undeniable fluidity and complexity of Chicana identity and experience.

Fittingly, at the close of the story, losing his breath in pain, caught in Paloma's

talons, her ex-boyfriend calls her "Tecolotl, lechuza, bruja" (lara silva 2013, 95). Unable to call her Paloma, he struggles to name her in her fullness, not altogether human, something incalculably more powerful that can only be named in a series of parts. She transformed into a new being with the magical capacity to kill in vengeance and lift off into flight. Paloma and Tía decide when they will flee, return to, or outright destroy the intimate relationships that cause them harm. lara silva effectively fuses the figure of the lechuza, bruja, and curandera, and, thereby explodes an otherwise realist prose with moments of magical realism. Through a feminist revision of conventionally understood discrete images, lara silva affirms that Chicana women like Paloma and Tía can effectively transform their way out of suffering by collapsing the traditional dualistic distinctions framing the world surrounding them and by "remember[ing] how to fly" (lara silva 2013, 78).

**Representing Dicho and Riffing off Canto**

Just as lara silva's narrative revises and augments aspects of Anaya's classic tale via a Chicana feminist stance that yokes realism within a magical realist mode, it also taps into and infuses sonic and vernacular threads of Mexican American popular culture. lara silva makes legible an "archive of the unheard and overheard" musical and non-musical sounds in her narrative (Alvarado 2018, 583). Framed within her story, both the romance and the borderlands South are metaphoric shorthand for the nation, one wherein Paloma has fallen out of love and is hence imagined outside of the U.S. Southwest geographic borderlands. Compressing multiple thematic concerns within the confines of a short, written work by drawing from a variety of culturally produced sources, lara silva carves out the space for a trans-regional referentially complex narrative that seamlessly embeds prose with proverb and song. In effect, her narrative does not simply challenge conventional aesthetic strategies by inter-textually reworking key images; but rather, her narrative creates an altogether

different culturally rich story that makes profoundly clear the tensions surrounding love and cultural and familial belonging for Chicana feminists. On the one hand, "tecolotl" ends with Paloma in flight, announcing that she is "coming home" (lara silva 2013, 98). Her baby now magically restored to the protection of her womb. The plot closes as she soars securely enveloped in the "infinite tenderness" of her new identity and chosen family (lara silva 2013, 98). On the other hand, Paloma's ability to dream up and fly off in search of her final "home" is predicated on her human self-destruction, her complete isolation from the world she once knew, and her radical dislocation in the sky. She notes: "We'll soar in the sky together and no one below will know—or believe—we exist" (lara silva 2013, 98). In other words, her transformation into a new powerful mythical figure costs her not only her human form but also requires her permanent estrangement from the world she once belonged to.

Drawing from conjunto song lyrics and incorporating orally circulated Mexican proverbs, lara silva she indexes the aural richness and strength of Mexican American cultural experiences and expressions, capturing on the page the ethereal cadence and sound of Mexican American culture's imaginative pulse. For instance, as lara silva describes Paloma's relationship with her boyfriend, song lyrics become the medium by which she inscribes the contours of their whirlwind love story on to the page. Deeply attentive to culturally specific sounds and musical forms, lara silva's short story textually renders a soundscape, which represents Mexican diasporic experience through dynamic metaphors of migration. Sounds of this kind are "heard through culturally and historically situated forms of listening, that is, through aural modes of attention that circulate within social fields of meaning and experience contoured by power, politics, and economy" and lara silva invites readers to take part in these modes of attentive listening by fastening these

audible transfronteriza soundscapes on the page (Chavez 2017, 7). Invested in representing more than a fantastical magical fictional realm into which her characters (and her readers) can escape, lara silva realistically renders audible cultural aspects of contemporary Chicano experience in her prose.

For instance, Paloma describes the intimate moments between her and her boyfriend, noting that her boyfriend, "…held [her], singing Ramón Ayala's songs against [her] ear, [his] breath on [her] neck" (lara silva 2013, 81). This reference sets the scene of an intimate embrace between two lovers gesturing specifically to a seductive tempo and precise regional acoustic sonic flavor. This sonic reference functions as a mediating force that sets the very timbre of the imagined acoustic backdrop for the characters' burgeoning brown love. Love songs "circulate among *raza* in a rich variety of forms, including *ranchera* songs, *boleros*, *baladas*, lyrical love *corridos*, *huapangos*, *valses*, and *cumbias*, with innumerable themes and scenarios" (Broyles-González 2002, 1999). Ramon Ayala's song geographically transposes the couple momentarily from their (dis)placement in the Northeast world they inhabit as college students, and transports them back to the audibly Norteño imagined borderlands space that once was their home by summoning "sonic imaginaries of the borderlands" (Vargas 2012, xii). The song foregrounds the couple's fleeting ephemeral mobile Latinidad, their connection to one another vis-à-vis their bond as children of migrant laborers of Mexican origin, and their connection to the borderlands. Literally, sonically, and symbolically Ayala's song affirms that there is no Eden on earth for brown love to securely exist. It signals the intra-communal rejection, pain, and longing between and amongst people within and outside of the U.S., a fractious community figured through the tonal complexity of the accordion's amplified sound, comprised of Tejanos who have no other choice but to redefine and recreate what home, nation, love, and belonging can be.

The saliency of lara silva's invocation of song through reference to Ramón Ayala cannot be overstated. In "tecolotl" the lyrics to a popular romantic contemporary conjunto ballad figure centrally because they activate the owl that is dormant and not yet fully realized within Paloma. In other words, Paloma's initial passionate connection with her boyfriend emerges from their shared experience of being migrants in diasporic flight and their shared bond as racialized subjects. This connection is made clear through the language and soundscape lifted from Ayala's popular contemporary Norteño song and through her very name. As Chicana feminist theorist Lorena Alvarado cautions, "One cannot ignore the repeating *paloma* motif. The dove as trope continually appears in Mexican and Latin American traditional musical genres. Typically, the *paloma* is a pained or disappeared subject, consoled or desperately searched for" (Alvarado 2016, 2009). Paloma is aptly named and the lyrics to the sampled song threaded without warning into lara silva's story are as follows: "Voy a buscar, un rinconcito en el cielo, para llevar a mi amor. Voy a buscar un rinconcito en el cielo, para escondernos tú y yo. Un Rinconcito en el cielo juntos unidos tú y yo, y cuando caiga la noche te daré mi amor.[11]

Paloma and her boyfriend were far away from home and when they crossed paths. Their love was stoked by a cultural connection that fomented their romantic bond. Indeed, Paloma's boyfriend whispers a lyrical language of love, summoning the soundscape of a song whose accordion driven melody Paloma intimately recognized. Thematically aligned with "tecolotl," Ramon Ayala's song "Rinconcito en el cielo" bespeaks of a love that has no home and echoes Tía's longing to build a little home in the sky with Paloma. Ayala's song resounds a lover's impossible geographic longing for home. The singer longs to find a home in a tiny corner of the sky in which he and his lover can take refuge and hide. Tía's love, expressed through care work and loyalty, first planted the wondrous longing to become an owl in Paloma. As they played

the childhood game tecolotl, lara silva riffs off Ayala as Tía reminded Paloma: "You need to remember how to fly so that you can find your way *pa'l cielo* and make a little house for us, just you and me" (lara silva 2013, 78). An intimate scene of whispered song, coupled with slow dancing between Paloma and her lover, pulsates through a voice fictionally rendered through sampled lyrics that catalyze her future transformation from woman to owl.

As the acoustics amplify Ayala's song and cement the couple's longing, Paloma's human body is anatomically taken apart piece by piece; she is read through fragments and enveloped by a regional soundscape which coheres the idea of a passionate love even as her human form is undone. "Hands," "throat," "belly," "breast," shoulder," "neck," and "hips" are sensually focalized, and then transformed through erotic touch into animal form. Noting their mutual longing to create another world fit for their love, Paloma notes:

> You'd hold me close, and we'd look up at the sky while you turned me around, singing in your gravelly voice. *Voy a buscar un rincocito en el cielo*. I felt luminescent. *Para llevar a mi amor*. I twined myself about you. *Voy a buscar un rinconcito en el cielo*. And I strained to see how close to inside your skin I could breathe. *Para escondernose tú y yo*. And decided breathing was not all that important. *Un rinconcito en el cielo*. And held your heartbeat in my hand. (lara silva 2013, 82-83)

Typographically signaled through italics, lara silva intermittently grafts popular lyrics, weaving them and interchangeably highlighting them with/in her prose to mark the moments when Paloma loses herself, longing to be fused into one with her lover. The lyrics function as a romantic inter-text, a sonic incantation that index how Paloma's boyfriend puts her under his thick love spell. Song lyrics also weave the complex interplay of diaspora, forced

exile, race, love, and gender, and the meaning the sonic borderlands play in fomenting a U.S. Chicana/o experience.

The expressive practice of Mexican proverb is also infused into the heart of lara silva's short story. Paloma's love interest's knowledge of Mexican proverb showcases his transnational cultural and geographic ties. When Paloma arrives at her ex's cabin ready to murder him transformed into owl form, Paloma notes: "I saw you wake with a start at my long whistling sounds, old superstitions striking you, *El indio muere cuando canta el tecolotl*" (lara silva 2013, 93). This use of proverb reveals lara silva's investment in reproducing (and discursively conserving) the cultural hallmarks of her ethnic community. In seven typographically distinct Spanish words, she underscores her explicit knowledge of Mexican proverb and folkloric knowledge surrounding the image of the owl and (pre)serves it through her narrative code-switching and intertextual referencing. By doing this lara silva gestures towards the vernacular cultural practices, discursive play, and artistic expressive formations that circulate within and beyond the boundaries of the nation state and draws attention to how Chicana feminists represent these phenomena through aesthetic production.

ire'ne lara silva continues to assert herself as a myth-maker in her own right.[12] She challenges the conventional way images and figures are rendered within the Mexican American literary imaginary. "tecoltl" re-envisions three key paradigmatic images. By recasting the image of the bruja at the fire side dance ritual, the image of the curandera's healing pouch, and finally and most notably by using the metaphorics of human to animal blending, she creates new mythical images of Chicana women through her stories. As demonstrated, lara silva engages and resists close identification with Anaya's novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, given that she invests in scoring new possibilities

for Chicanas of the twenty-first century. She disarticulates the conventional meanings associated with the bruja, curandera, and lechuza images and re-casts these images by fusing all three figures into one polymorphous character—announcing the power, and complexity of contemporary Chicana feminist experience. Moreover, her composition gestures towards the vibrancy of a body of literature in conversation and contestation. Though her story lifts her characters into figurative flight—in search of possibilities in tiny corners in the sky, in search of new places to live and perhaps love (again)—the fantastic elements of her story are tempered by lara silva's keen awareness of, and commitment to, incorporating the sounds, sayings, myths, rhythms, and tempos emerging out of contemporary Chicana con(texts) even as she imagines what it means to be heartbroken by those we love.

## Notes

[1] The author writes her name in lowercase.

[2] This novel has been translated into Italian, Portuguese, and German and reprinted over eighteen times. For its unique publication history, see Saldívar (1990) and Cantú (2016). For information on attempts to ban the novel in the U.S. See Halperin (2012).

[3] This term references Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa, and Rudolfo Anaya. The term itself reveals Quinto Sol's role in shaping literary nationalism. Quinto Sol's role in promoting conventional heteronormative literary figures has been widely debated. See Dennis López (2010). On the other hand, critics also argue that Quinto Sol resists "monological readings" given the diverse texts it published (Cutler 2015, 60).

[4] I note this with caution. I do not privilege European translation and European readership as the litmus test of success. By detailing the novel's unique publication history, my aim is to further situate Anaya's novel in its literary history, even as I compare, contrast, and explore the productive interplay between lara silva and Anaya's narratives. Though I comparatively grapple with lara silva and Anayas's written work, I do not consider lara silva's work as derivative of Anaya's nor do I consider Anaya's novel as aesthetically stronger than lara silva's.

[5] Chicana decolonial feminist Irene Lara is not to be confused with ire'ne lara silva the Chicana writer.

[6] See Alica Gaspar de Alba (2014), Irene Lara (2005), and Ana Castillo (1995).

[7] The creative refiguring analyzed in this essay exists within a larger tradition of Chicana feminist re-membering of figures including, but not limited to, La Llorona, La Virgen de Guadalupe, Malintzin, Coyolxauhqui etc. This blurring of boundaries and reconfiguration of mythic figures can be seen across literary forms in plays, poetry, the novel, the short story and even in children's literature. See Anzaldúa (1993) and (1995). See also Cisneros (1991) and Ana Castillo (1993). For a few scholarly studies that theorize the aestheticization of mythic figures by Chicana feminists written by scholars of Chicana feminist literature and culture, see the following: Esquibel (2006); Perez (2008); Blake (2008); Gaspar de Alba and Lopez (2011); and Gaspar de Alba (2014).

[8] lara silva's short story dovetails with Anaya's novel in three key ways: Through the fire side dance ritual, the image of the curandera's healing pouch, and through the metaphorics of species blending.

[9] Tía's character evokes Alicia Gaspar de Alba's notion of the "bad woman." She notes: "…the bad woman, who exceeded her place, the *chingada* who sold herself, the traitor to the nation, the weeping woman who killed/aborted/abandoned her child, the witchy dark woman, the illegal foreign woman, the girl who "asked for it," the sister who betrayed her bother and killed her mother, the wannabe white woman, the woman who shamed her community/family by loving another woman—is "framed" for her own failure to succeed or survive (2014, 19).

[10] For analysis of another story within lara silva's 2013 *flesh to bone* collection wherein lara silva defies the established borders between people, see Ellis (2017).

[11] Loosely translated, the lyrics to Ramón Ayala's in English are as follows: I'm going to look for a little corner in the sky, to take my love. I'm going to look for a little corner in the sky, to hide you and me. A little corner in the sky, together you and I united, and when night falls I will give you my love. Ramón Ayala y Los Bravos Del Norte, "Rinconcito En El Cielo," Song A1, Freddie Records, 1985.

[12] See *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Woman of Color* wherein Moraga and Anzaldúa describe their vision of a mundo zurdo. They write: "Change requires a lot of heat. It requires both the alchemist and the welder, the magician and the laborer, the witch and the warrior, the myth-smasher and myth-maker" (1981, 218).

## References

Alcalá, Rita Cano. "From Chingada to Chingona: La Malinche Redfined, or a long Line of Hermanas." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 26, no. 2 (2001): 33-61.

Alvarado, Lorena. "Never Late: Unwelcome Desires and Diasporas in Chavela Vargas' Last Works." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 26, no. 1 (2016): 17-35.

———. "Listening to Literature: Popular Music, Voice, and Dance in the Latina/o Literary Imagination, 1980-2010." In *The Cambridge History of Latina/o American Literature*, edited by John Morán González and Laura Lomas, 583-601. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Anaya, Rudolfo. *Bless Me, Ultima.* New York: Warner Books, 1972.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza.* San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987.

———. *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del Otro Lado.* San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1993.

———. *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y La Llorona*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1995.

Ayala, Ramón. y Los Bravos Del Norte. 1985. Rinconcito en el cielo. Freddie Records.

Blake, Debra J. *Chicana Sexuality and Gender: Cultural Refiguring in Literature, History, and Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Bruce-Novoa, Juan. *RetroSpace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature, Theory, and History.* Houston: Arte Público Press, 1990.

Broyles-González. "Ranchera Musics and the Legendary Lydia Mendoza: Performing Social Location and Relations." In *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change,* edited by Norma E. Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramirez, 183-206. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Cantú, Roberto. *The Forked Juniper: Critical Perspectives on Rudolfo Anaya.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016.

Castillo, Ana. *So Far From God.* New York: Norton, 1993.

———. *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma.* New York: Plume, 1995.

Castro, Rafaela G. *Chicano Folklore: A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals, and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Chavez, Alex E. *Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Poetics of Huapango Arribeño.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Cisneros, Sandra. *Woman Hollering Creek: And Other Stories.* New York: Random House, 1991.

Cutler, Paul Alba. *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Di Lorio Sandin, Lyn and Richard Perez. "Introduction: Tracing Magical Irruptions in US Ethnic Literatures." In *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures,* edited by Lyn Di Lorio Sandin and Richard Perez, 3-15. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Ellis, Amanda. "Border Arte as Medicine: Healing Beyond the Confines of Our Skin." *Chicana/ Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 17, no. 1 (2017): 30-59.

Esquibel, Catriona Rueda. *With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

Gaspar de Alba, Alica and Alma López eds. *Our Lady of Controversy: Alma López "irreverent*

*apparition."* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

Gaspar de Alba, Alica. *[Un]Framing the "Bad Woman: Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014.

Geweke, Frauke. "Latino/a Literature in Western Europe." In *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature,* edited by Suzanne Bost and Frances Aparicio, 107-115. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Halperin, Laura. "Censorship in Latino/a Texts" in *The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature,* edited by Suzanne Bost and Frances Aparicio, 495- 505. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Kanoza, Theresa M. "The Golden Carp and Moby Dick: Rudolfo Anaya's Multiculturalism." *MELUS* 24, no. 2 (1999): 159-171.

Lara, Irene. "Bruja Positionalities: Toward a Chicana Latina Spiritual Activism." *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 4, no. 2 (2005):10-45.

———. "Goddess of the Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary: Beyond the Virtuous Virgen/ Pagan Puta Dichotomy." *Feminist Studies* 34, no. 1/2 (2008): 99-127.

lara silva, ire'ne. *Flesh to Bone*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2013.

Lopez, Dennis. "Good-Bye Revolution–Hello Cultural Mystique: Quinto Sol Publications and Literary Nationalism" *MELUS* 35, no. 3 (2010): 183-210.

Martínez, Danizette. "Teaching Chicana/o Literature in Community College with Ana Castillo's So Far from God." *Rocky Mountain Review* 65, no. 2 (2011): 216-225.

Moraga, Cherrie L. and Gloria E. Anzaldúa. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Woman of Color.* Berkley: Third Woman Press, 1981.

Perez, Domino. *There was a Woman: from Folklore to Popular Culture.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Rebolledo, Tey Diana. "Gloria Anzaldúa's Literature for Children." *PMLA* 121, no. 1 (2006): 279-284.

Romero, Rolando and Amanda Nolacea Harris, eds. *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2005.

Saldívar, Ramon. *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference,* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.

Vargas, Deborah R. *Dissonant Divas in Chicana Music: The Limits of La Onda.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.