

I have to tell you what I need from God. I have to change into a boy. This is what I want and it's not an easy thing to ask for. . . This wish was what I want for myself.

—Carla Trujillo, *What Night Brings*

THE BIRDY AND THE BEES: Queer Chicana Girlhood in Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings*

Marivel Danielson

Carla Trujillo's first novel, What Night Brings (2003), introduces a wise eleven-year-old Chicana who navigates daily encounters with parental abuse, powerlessness, and increasing confusion about the dynamics of her own nascent sexual subjectivity. Isolated from any semblance of queer community, Trujillo's protagonist fashions her own gendered, sexual, and racialized subjectivity out of the traces of non-normativity or "queer-ness" she finds along her journey. The novel's protagonist employs survival strategies that put flesh onto Emma Pérez's "sitio y lengua" framework (1991), as the child constructs both a space and a language in which to speak her uniquely queer Chicana self. Negotiating intersectionalities of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and spirituality, I introduce the concepts of "familiar alterity" and the juxtaposition of creative versus reactive subversion to help inform my discussion of the young protagonist's platform of resistance and her disruption of largely homophobic and misogynist centers of power in her home and community. [Key words: Chicana, queer, Carla Trujillo, gender, sexuality, Emma Pérez, sitio y lengua, lesbian]

Marci is a girl who wants to be a boy so she can be in love with a girl. She introduces her plight with the above declaration while nightly imploring God, baby Jesus, and the Virgin Mary to grant her wish of bodily conversion. At different points along the narrative road that Carla Trujillo paves in her 2003 debut novel, *What Night Brings*, the book's eleven-year-old Chicana protagonist, Marci Cruz, constructs a position that enables her to shift from an initial identification as transgendered to a full acceptance of both her female body and her unnamed homoerotic attractions. Despite this layered representation of subjectivity, Marci's ultimate struggle is to reconcile the relationships between her physical body, her gendered behavior, and her sexual desires. She longs for a bodily transformation that will authorize her attraction to girls. Marci dreams and prays for a male body replete with power, agency, and freedom to act upon desires for girls. Yet in spite of Marci's desperate pleas for a penis, she fails to exhibit other key components of a transgendered or transsexual incompatibility with her own female body. Given the primary impetus of sexual desire rather than corporeal incongruity, when does this young protagonist's vision of transgendered identity shift toward an acceptance of queer or lesbian identity? How does Marci's ethnic identity intersect with her self-definition as a sexual and gendered subject? How is Marci's experience as a queer Chicana subject impeded by her lack of knowledge and access to communities of affinity who share her sense of difference from social norms? How does Trujillo's novel put flesh onto "un sitio y una lengua" theory—that is, a space and a language of acceptance, nurturing, and agency—of the historian and novelist Emma Pérez (1991, 174–79)?

Throughout her career, Carla Trujillo has repeatedly repositioned herself on the theorized/theorizing continuum as a novelist, administrator, student, editor, and scholar. Her contribution to the body of theory on queer Chicana subjectivity

has been both prolific and profound. The editor and scholar behind two groundbreaking publications on Chicana lesbian identity, Trujillo has inspired critical engagement for more than a decade with her anthologized collections *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (1991) and *Living Chicana Theory* (1998). Her collective and individual publications have helped to initiate important critical conversations about the role of gender, sexuality, patriarchy, and homophobia in Chicana and Chicano culture and community. Her first novel, *What Night Brings*, was released to significant critical acclaim and appreciative reception from popular and academic audiences alike.¹

Growing up in an industrial town in Northern California in the 1960s, Marci Cruz copes with a harsh reality as the supposed innocence of childhood becomes distorted by daily emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her father. When she is not protecting herself from her father's rage and flying fists, Marci also wages a heart-wrenching battle against her own physical body, struggling to understand her gendered and sexual self. In addition to a violent but emotionally vulnerable father, the family includes a passive and enabling mother and their two young daughters: the determined, witty, resourceful, and wise-for-her-age Marci and her younger sister, Corin, a shell of a girl who has grown numb and emotionally distant due to abuse and neglect. As the novel's central character, Marci narrates the sisters' struggles for immediate survival and ultimate freedom from their father's rage and mother's blind love for her husband. In addition to the parentally inflicted abuse, the novel details Marci's attempts to understand the complexities of her own developing gender and sexual identities. As an adolescent, Marci begins to experience feelings of romantic desire, but the objects of her attraction are girls and women, leading her to grapple with the limits of her understanding of female desire and sexuality alongside her actively engaged sense of spirituality.

What Night Brings traces a young queer girl's path to possibility, as she fights to challenge the violence, silences, and secrecy surrounding sexuality and difference. Trujillo's text engages in the subversion of gender and sexual norms through the lens of a queer Chicana girlhood. In this context, the invocation of queer subjectivity is not meant as a static reference to any particular sexual practice or classification or to the sex or gender of the subjects. Instead, as Annamarie Jagose affirms, "its non-specificity guarantees it against recent criticisms made of the exclusionist tendencies of lesbian and gay as identity categories" (1996, 76).² Since Marci struggles with multiple intersections of gender and sexuality, I believe the broadness of the term *queer* speaks more adequately to her experience. I will introduce here the concepts of familiar alterity as well as creative versus reactive subversion. These concepts provide a mapping of the stages of Marci's journey from silence, powerlessness, and invisibility to agency, self-definition, love, and respect. I also discuss the processes through which queer subjectivity—in the form of Marci's emerging *sitio y lengua*—intervenes in the institutions of patriarchy and misogyny as represented within family, church, and community.

Theorizing Queer Chicana Space and Language

The novel details Marci's survival strategies, putting flesh onto Emma Pérez's *sitio y una lengua* framework, as the child constructs both a space and a language in which to speak her uniquely queer Chicana self. Pérez's model lays the critical groundwork for women of color and lesbians of color to gather and engender communities of support and safety from which to mobilize and speak their own unique gendered, racialized, classed, and sexual subjectivities independent from tokenized inclusion in dominantly male, heterosexual, Euro-American, and middle-class spheres. Pérez's vision of space and language grounds itself in a rejection of colonialist oppressions and in the valuing of the words and worlds of women of color. While Pérez acknowledges the potential for a separatist reading of her model, she offers the contrastingly nuanced interpretation of her

paradigm's positive, self-affirming, and survivalist slant. She states, in explication of her framework, "Call me a separatist, but to me this is not about separatism. It is about survival. I think of myself as one who must separate to my space and language of women to revitalize, to nurture and be nurtured" (1991, 178). It's important to note that I will not argue that Marci employs Pérez's *sitio y lengua* in order to "find herself" or to assemble her fragmented identities. As Deena González reminds us, "It is not true that [Chicanas] do not know who we are. If anything, we should suffer the accusation that we know too much who we are, have too much identity" (1995, 43). Trujillo's protagonist is not searching for herself as much as she is searching for the language and community that will speak her experience of sexual, gendered, and racialized difference.³

In Chela Sandoval's terms, an invocation of coalitional politics enables Marci to form a sense of community through her "connections-by-affinity" and "proximities-of-being" that link her to other queer subjects in spite of their unique and often dramatically distinct versions of queer identity (2002, 20). Because the notion of affinity and proximity among queer subjects has the potential to cover a wide range of gendered, sexual, cultural, class, and racial differences from a heterosexual and patriarchal norm, the concept of familiar alterity, or unity in difference, builds upon Sandoval's coalitional frameworks. Yet rather than focus on the power of sameness to draw together groups of people, familiar alterity emphasizes the role of shared (although perhaps quite unique) experiences of difference from a default norm in the development and bonding of queer communities. Throughout most of the novel, Marci fails to locate subjects who share a similar sense of difference as she experiences it. Marci knows no other girls who pray to be transformed into boys. Her exposure to media imagery appears wholly heteronormative. Even with extended family members who deviate from a clear heterosexual norm or experience a bodily transformation from male to female, Marci expresses a lack of affinity. However,

her experience of alienation establishes Marci's sitio as defined in difference from a gendered and sexual norm, aligning her with other alienated subjects. Such connections eventually begin to afford her a safe and supportive space from which to continue to explore issues of gender, sexuality, culture, and self.

One of the key concepts in Trujillo's narrative strategy of subversion is the notion of the productive potential of interstitial social spaces.⁴ In an effort to negotiate her difference, Marci must confront her alienation from existing norms. Gloria Anzaldúa's brilliantly poetic elucidation of mestiza consciousness calls for a "massive uprooting of dualistic thinking" and emerges from a space of multiple intersections that present the possibility of new modes of being. Though the knowledge of this possibility eludes Marci until late in the novel, her journey toward self-definition parallels the evolution of Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness:

This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from the continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (1987, 79–80)

In much of the novel, Marci tries to conform to rigid paradigms of sexuality and gender. She accepts a unitary version of sexuality wherein her desires for girls may be normalized only within a male body. Eventually, she reconciles these desires within her female body and invokes the in-between state of Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness. Ultimately, Marci's journey necessitates that she establish a "third element" of self wherein a queer or lesbian identity may be possible.⁵

For Anzaldúa, intersectionalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality inspire not simply another rigidly defined category of being, but rather a new way of thinking about the insufficiencies of all previous categorizations. Anzaldúa's duality-rejecting mestiza consciousness, alongside Pérez's theorization of autochthonous spaces and languages envisioned and enacted by queer women of color, connects directly to individual subjectivity and especially to the fashioning of alternative modes of gendered, sexual, cultural, and racial identity outside the confines and prescribed norms of heterosexist patriarchal and racist societies. In this case, then, the critical dialogue between Anzaldúa and Pérez swirls around the birth of a new consciousness that insists on moving beyond the hybridity of a few components and into the simultaneity of myriad multiplicities.

In addition to moving beyond binary visions of being, scholarship on queer Chicana subjectivity insists on the recognition, respect, and naming of these in-between spaces of creative and political productivity. Natasha López's poetic contribution "Trying to Be Dyke and Chicana" is included in an earlier publication by Carla Trujillo, the anthology *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (López 1991, 84). López uses the first half of the piece to develop the notion of both physical and emotional distance between her sexual and cultural/ethnic selves. This division comes not as a result of her own fragmented subjectivity, but rather from society's inability to imagine the simultaneity of her experience as a queer Chicana. Tired of rigid separations, López's poem performs a union of "dyke" and "Chicana" into "Chyk-ana," transforming two into one, lending wholeness, permanence, and specific language to her experience and existence. Similarly, Marci attempts to negotiate her sense of psychological chaos caused by her inability to unite her many different subjectivities—gendered, sexual, racialized—into one positive and coherent conceptualization of self. Marci's identities are shaped by excess and insufficiency: too dark to be beautiful, too tough for a girl, the wrong body

for a boy, and the wrong desires for a girl. She also studies the usefulness and inadequacies of the language employed by adults in her family and community to describe differences of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. From labels such as “queer” to the intricacies of racial and ethnic identity, Marci tirelessly investigates the power and possibilities of the language that surrounds her. Church, school, and the library become sites of discovery as her detective work reveals traces of linguistic meaning in adult dialogues. Despite the nuns’, priests’, and her parents’ unwillingness to provide answers to Marci’s questions, she takes charge of her own learning and reclaims these places as sites of intellectual discovery.

In these ways, the novel provides the flesh atop the skeletal frame of Pérez’s paradigm of *un sitio y una lengua*. The novel’s protagonist and narrator reveals the vital connection between space and language, as the hostile environments at school, home, and church threaten to silence Marci’s voice as an emerging queer Chicana subject. Pérez’s *sitio* is marked by a “rejection of colonial ideology” and “capitalist patriarchy” in much the same way that Marci’s experience of sexual and gendered difference resists the norms of heterosexism and male domination (Pérez 1991, 161). Trujillo’s novel is a map of one child’s journey to self-discovery, beginning first with the need for a safe space in the face of threatening male sociosexual and colonial powers; then a grappling with the language of ethnic, gender, and sexual alterity; and finally ending with Marci’s inclusion into various communities, or *sitios*, defined by shared experiences of difference and oppression.

Invisibilities of Victimization

Marci’s day-to-day existence is burdened by the unrealistic expectations and painful realities of both family and community. She struggles to be seen and acknowledged by the world around her as she works to alter her impossible body to match the desires she is unwilling to relinquish. As an abused child,

Marci offers heartbreaking accounts, in horrific detail, of her victimization by her out-of-control father. She describes a constant threat of physical violence: “Nothing is as scary as my dad getting mad. I can’t remember the first time he hit me, only the sound of mad feet” (11). Many of the happiest of moments in Marci’s life—Christmas vacation, Easter, a spaghetti feed at the church, and payday—are marred by her father’s explosive temper. Marci’s narration brings focus to her bodily condition, in terms of both her physical pain and the sensory experiences such as the sound of angry footsteps and the force of a leather belt yanked angrily from her father’s pants.

The physical and emotional violence she endures creates a spatial void, as home and family are characterized as hostile and unpredictable places, spaces of constant threat. Marci expresses a clear understanding of the myriad ways abuse shapes her daily existence and her personality: “I’d be so scared I didn’t know who I was. It was like I was across the room watching him come after me, chase me, then catch me” (11). Marci describes a psychic split in which her victimized self receives her father’s blows while another stunned version of herself witnesses from across the room. When her father leaves the home for a brief time, Marci immediately notes the positive impact of this temporary respite: “I didn’t know it, but I guess I must of spent a lot of time being mad or afraid. It was nice being something else” (102). Freed momentarily from a mode of constant fear, Marci acknowledges the degree to which she is controlled not just physically but psychologically by her father’s rage.

In an effort to counter this erasure and displacement of her basic rights and needs, Marci continually attempts to assert her presence, her humanity, in the face of an attacker who objectifies her to the point of an almost complete invisibility: “I looked at his face; trying to make his eyes see mine. *Look at me! Look!* My eyes begged him. But it was like he’d turned into a monster, a werewolf

with eyes that couldn't see" (12). In this moment of violence, her father's abuse erases her. He cannot see her body, the body he brutalizes. Marci struggles to impose her subjectivity upon him, to insist on her presence—that he *see* her—but he refuses to acknowledge her as a subject. Her battle can be understood as an insistence on her possibility—she *is* possible—in spite of her father's inability or refusal to *see* her. Marci experiences this erasure as a sense of both invisibility and silence, as she reports, "If my dad didn't have eyes, he sure didn't have ears. It was like he saw, heard, and felt nothing" (12). This passage evidences the ability of violence to dehumanize both the attacker and the attacked; the abuse strips Marci of her voice and consequently her humanity, while it simultaneously reduces her father to a violent force devoid of all human senses.

Marci's repeated attempts to be seen and heard can be placed on a continuum of subversive acts that range from wholly creative to exclusively reactive. Within this framework, I define subversion as any movement toward the destabilization of existing societal norms (i.e., heterosexuality, patriarchy, Eurocentrism, to name a few) that purport to represent a majority group. I also distinguish between a reactive subversion that draws on preexisting language and conceptualizations to define its challenge (in reaction to existing frameworks), and a creative subversion that moves toward ideological shifts that may or may not be inspired by existing frameworks, but that define their struggles in new spaces and languages. In other words, much like Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness, creative subversion produces meaning by posing new questions, rather than simply finding new answers to preexisting questions.

Additionally, Marci's silence and invisibility suggest that her lack of *sitio* thwarts her ability to produce *lengua*. Her experience of home comes alongside a doctrine of silence that strips Marci of her voice and her opinions.⁶ Marci and her sister find themselves at the mercy of multiple oppressions that layer

upon one another, limiting their avenues for resistance. The girls lack both the psychological space of a home as a safe haven as well as the emotionally supportive space of the family unit. The girls' only potential ally in the home, their mother, wholly fails to interject herself into the system of abuse perpetrated by her husband. While Marci characterizes her father through his angry attacks, the lack of physical contact from her mother wounds her most: "I remember the exact day [mom] stopped letting me touch her" (44). When Marci rests her head against her mother's arm during a Christmas ceremony at church, her mother uses her body language to set a clear tone of distance and disconnection: "She didn't look at me, or say anything. Instead, she shook her shoulder and used her elbow to push me away. Hard...It made me feel bad, like I was shriveling up inside" (45). The devastation of this physical rejection from her mother appears to be equal to the horrendous physical assaults by her father. Extending far beyond the oppressive proverb that suggests children ought to be "seen and not heard," Marci and Corin's violent father and complicitly silent mother ascribe to the parenting philosophy that children should be both unseen and unheard—in a virtually unachievable state of nonexistence.

Marci's battle to be seen by her father aligns itself with reactive subversion, since she continues to appeal to patriarchy, imploring that he acknowledge her, without destabilizing the male center of power within the family that imposes this sentence of invisibility on its female members. While it appears that Marci and Corin's father directs most of his rage at his daughters, with little or no objection from his wife, Marci still views her mother as a similarly tortured victim: "I felt sorry for Mom because she was always trying to make Dad happy. She'd look at him like a scared pup" (11). In the early stages of the novel, neither Marci nor her mother dares to interrupt the discourse of male power in the home. But soon Marci's tactical approach shifts toward creative

subversion when, after a severe beating, Marci and her sister decide to disown their father. When the girls inform their father—whom they now call by his first name, Eddie—of their intentions, he erupts in anger, “You can’t disown me. *I’m* the father and that means only *I* do the disowning!” Yet Marci and Corin resist his attempt to resume control of the situation, emphasizing their determination to challenge his authority: “We’re disowning you...we don’t want you for our dad anymore....So from now on you’re not our dad. And we’re not calling you that anymore” (115). When he responds with physical violence, the girls further illustrate their resolve to defy his power even under the threat of his wrath: “You can hit us all you want but it ain’t gonna make us take you back” (116). This final statement is significant because it suggests that Marci and Corin have moved toward a new organizational understanding of the power distribution within their family. Rather than accept victimization as female children, they not only declare a semblance of familial power (disowning Eddie) but also reposition the father as a subordinate figure in position to be taken back (or not) by his daughters. Yet Marci and her sister do not seek to dominate their father, physically or psychologically. They simply assert their intention to stop performing a passive enabling of patriarchal rule in the home. Marci announces the girls’ resistant stance and in doing so lends a sense of authority and importance to their desires. The act of disowning the father positions the girls as agents of linguistic determination: “So from now on you’re not our dad. And we’re not calling you [dad] anymore” (115). Disowning also displays a discursive act of creative subversion in the context of the language of power, yet because the shift in linguistic referencing fails to change the violent dynamics of the family, an actual safe space or *sitio* remains elusive.

Gendered Acts: Feigning Femininity

Initially what appears to be a search for the appropriate gendered space—Marci

is a girl, but often feels more like a boy in terms of her interests and abilities—ultimately moves beyond the binaries of masculine and feminine and into the unique desires that define Marci's sexual subjectivity. Much of the time, Marci appears comfortable in her own body and with her own performance of femininity, yet she perceives her gendered behaviors as resistant to societal norms or expectations. Despite Marci's minimal exposure to mainstream media, she shows a keen understanding of how femininity becomes a racialized construct. She notes the limited visibility of female characters in her favorite television programs and observes that even the beautiful Rita Hayworth could not "make it in Hollywood" unless she changed her name because "they can't sound real, and for sure not Mexican" (6). Early in the novel, Marci approaches her mother and aunt to declare her intent to dye her hair blonde and adopt the new name Linda Ledoux. Her announcement prompts uncontrollable laughter from both women, as her mother explains the logical incongruencies of the child's desired transformation: "Ay, no. You look too much like one of the Indians from the *Texas Rangers*. Y también, being named *Linda* means you have to *be pretty*"; and her aunt exclaims that Marci is "too goddamn dark to be running around with blonde hair" (6). Marci's attempt to align herself with the beautiful female Hollywood mainstream evokes only skepticism and ridicule from her family, who fail to disentangle themselves from an ideology of beauty that excludes women with Mexican-sounding names as well as dark or indigenous-looking women of any origin. Therefore, Marci's attempt at self-translation (she desires to be beautiful so she will rewrite herself as an Anglo woman) fails to communicate this new meaning of self to her own family members. This translation accommodates itself to existing categories of racialized beauty and fails to produce any new meaning with regard to Hollywood's, or even her family's, colonizing aesthetic ideals.

In addition to facing her family and community's resistance to her attempts at femininity, Marci herself frequently admits to a discomfort with the traditional

trappings of girlhood. She expresses this disconnect from prescribed gender models through her choice of toys, activities, and behaviors. When Marci's mother instructs her daughters to pack their Barbie suitcases in preparation for an attempted escape from their home and violent family life, Marci's quiet defiance emerges in her response:

The day I use that Barbie doll suitcase is the day they'll have to take me to the State Hospital...Mom and [her father] Eddie must have gone to the Mother Superior for ideas on getting me a present, because they sure didn't pay any attention to what I really wanted: a gun and holster, cowboy boots, and a hat. I think both of them thought if they got me a Barbie doll suitcase I'd act more like a girl. (184)

Marci grasps the degree to which societal expectations factor into individual gender identity. She hypothesizes about several layers of social influence, from the Church (Mother Superior) to her parents, who work together in their attempts to shape Marci's behavior and being. Her theory of how the gift was chosen positions her parents and the Church as collaborators in a process of gender socialization that is decidedly materialistic: the Barbie doll suitcase is seemingly imbued with the power to transform Marci from tomboy to princess. Additionally, the reference positions the icon of Barbie—with her hyperbolic body measurements, makeup, long flowing hair, and bright pink signature color scheme—as the unattainable ideal of womanhood to which Marci refuses to aspire. In fact, she scoffs at the thought of the suitcase as a catalyst for any gendered conversion, indicating that her use of the suitcase would demonstrate her conformity to a prescribed system of gendered behaviors so antithetical to her own being that she would sooner accept the label of insanity than abide by the restrictions symbolized by the bag.

Yet in her resistance to carry the bag or “act like a girl,” Marci moves toward a conceptualization of gender that provides for a fluidity of being as suggested by Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (1990, 6)

The notion of performance here is key, since Marci recognizes societal pressures to act like a girl, yet displays no innate interest in the behaviors that she understands to be natural for female subjects. In her previous statement regarding preferred playthings, Marci rejects traditional symbols of childhood femininity, instead opting for the more stereotypically masculine gun and holster.⁷ Certainly the weapon, phallic in nature, suggests Marci’s longing for power and control of her vulnerable position at home. Additionally, her desire for a gun requires Marci to subvert the gender norms that threaten to restrict her being. In terms of gender and sexual subjectivity, Marci’s performance of gendered behavior appears confident, yet she fails to translate this gendered fluidity into a more inclusive paradigm of desire and sexual attraction. While she may feel authorized to express her interest in stereotypically masculine activities and toys without a male body, she remains unable to express her desires for girls from within her female body. For Marci, the discord between her desires and her body prompt her to formulate an impassioned plea to God, and in this case to the Mother of God, Mary, to transform her into a boy: “Mother Mary, please help me be a boy. I love girls so much and I need you and Baby Jesus to help God change me” (31). Marci continues to maintain, however, that her objective in wanting to be changed into a boy is not to

realign her corporeal and psychic selves, but rather to right the incongruity between her desires and the body from which she experiences them.

Even as Marci's insistence on her presence and possibility as a subject fails with her abusive father, she utilizes the same techniques in her relationship with God. When her persistent prayers remain unanswered, the protagonist calls out to God, rejecting the sort of invisibility and silence that marks her daily family life: "Look at me, God. Are you listening?" (31). She refuses to accept that her wishes will remain unheard and her reality unseen by the eyes of God, demanding that her presence and voice be acknowledged. Her tactical approach to resisting erasure serves her well throughout the rest of the novel as forces in her environment continually call into question the possibility of her gendered and sexual subjectivities. Marci's curiosity, her research skills, her resistant spirit, and her strong will enable her to launch a grassroots girlhood revolution against her incendiary home life.

A Birdy Sin Huevos: Pleasure, Power, and Privilege

Marci's nightly prayers for change detail her specific corporeal needs: a birdy with no huevos and "no chichis." Marci dismisses huevos (her word for testicles) as unimportant: "Why should I want to go walking around with an Achilles heel right in the middle of my crotch?" (158) Her hybrid construction morphs male and female genitalia so as to meet society's patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks and Marci's desire to edit the essentials of male anatomy. In Trujillo's text, Marci's thinking about the purpose of the penis and its associations with masculinity and male privilege can be divided into several distinct categories. The issue of physical pleasure is initially addressed when, after falling asleep so many nights with the whispered prayers of this desired conversion on her lips, Marci awakes to find a phallus, a "birdy," as she terms it, where her female genitalia used to be:

...after a few minutes, I decided it was okay to touch it. I slowly reached down. My fingers inched closer and closer till the very tip of my finger slid over the skin. It felt good! Like a Vienna sausage fresh out of the can. Each time my finger touched it, it moved a little, like a teeny lizard getting petted. (80)

Although Marci remains ignorant about the details of sexual reproduction, she is able to translate physical pleasure through this newly sprouted male organ. No mention of masturbation or sexual self-exploration is referenced in the novel, with the exception of this one instance in which the pleasure is experienced via a male phallus, suggesting the limits of Marci's interpretation of female sexuality. As a female, Marci does not explore the physical pleasures afforded to her by her female body, yet within the fantasy of transsexual transformation, her male body immediately presents to her the opportunity for self-exploration, stimulation, and pleasure.⁸ It is likely that this association with pleasure and male sexuality comes as a result of a familial and societal discourse of repressed female sexuality whereby women and girls are expected "to experience pleasure only in the context of institutional approval: through Church-sanctified marriage" (Zavella 2003, 228).⁹ Such a belief system relegates women to roles as asexual beings until an official union with a man deems them otherwise. In contrast to such a paradigm, Marci seeks sitio in which she can safely explore her physical and sexual being. A creative subversion of this sexist double standard would envision a world in which her girl body has the capacity for pleasure and exploration equal to a boy's. However, Marci cannot untangle sexual freedom from the masculine body and male privilege, and thus her pleasurable dream/fantasy relies heavily on the patriarchal norm of the male body as the center of sexual desire and pleasure. Just as Marci begins to explore her new body, she is awakened from this dream by the angry derisions of her mother: "Marrana! Keep your hands out of there" (80). Violently returned to her girlhood reality, she is reminded of her

restricted sexual status as a girl and of the humiliating stigma of finding sexual pleasure in her own female body.

Supergirls and Hombrecitos: In Defense of Self

Largely, however, such physical sensations, though exciting and enjoyable, are not offered as primary motivation for Marci's desired transformation into a boy. Instead, Marci views the male body as a site of gendered power that might help her to shed her role as helpless victim and vulnerable child. As a victimized child, Marci experiences a sense of vulnerability that is, in her view, enhanced by the limits of her gendered self. Pervasive throughout the novel are Marci's attempts to reject her helplessness by transforming herself from passive to active agent in her Supergirl rescue missions: "Every night I dreamed I saved beautiful girls. Usually, a mean man was hurting the girl. I'd beat up the man, then carry her away" (6). Rather than being rescued, Marci rescues another victim, inverting the power dynamics of her own home by avenging the crimes of a violent man. In her daily life, however, Marci struggles with the physical limits of her female body, wanting to be bigger and stronger, but unable to convince her family that weight lifting and martial arts are appropriate pastimes for a young girl.

In fact, when Marci attempts to incorporate some of the qualities of her Supergirl role into her daily encounters with her violent father, she once again confronts the limits of her gendered subjectivity—as interpreted by her father. Standing up to "Eddie"—a name that announces her father's failures as a paternal figure—Marci inspires a telling response from him: "Hijo, Marci, what a big little man you are now... Qué hombre! I didn't know I had me un hombrecito. Here I was thinking you was my little girl" (108). Marci's bravery, her outrage at mistreatment, her pride, and her refusal to submit are interpreted by her father as signifiers of masculinity. Yet rather than praise such qualities, as would seem to be the natural response within a patriarchal system, Marci's

father belittles her performance of masculinity by labeling her “un hombrecito” (a little man) and implies that such displays from a female will result only in unconvincing and even laughable imitation. Not only does this reaction privilege the male sex as the sole proprietor of brave and honorable acts, but it concomitantly limits and debases the worth of his daughter’s femininity.

A few days later, when, in a dream, Marci again attempts to challenge her father’s domination of her (and her mother and sister), she imagines her father again resorting to gender-based humiliation: “We should have called you Mauricio... You, girl... ain’t got shit down there except a little piece of tail. And that, little hombre... is all you’ll ever have” (144). Unaware of his daughter’s secret requests to be transformed into a boy, Marci’s father unconsciously alludes to her internal struggle as he displays an anxious desire to position her as both an unconvincing “little hombre” and an inferior *mujer*. His argument extends, this time, to Marci’s physical body, as he defines her through her lack of a penis, suggesting one cause for Marci’s constant obsession with acquiring such an organ. Her father invokes the phallus to authorize his power and male privilege:

“You’re going to have to figure out sooner or later that you ain’t never gonna be man enough to take on your father. Not as long as I’m still standing. Hell no! Your daddy here’s the one with the balls.” He pointed to his birdy. “And he ain’t scared of nothing. Nothing! You hear me? And I’m gonna tell you something else, he’s got this big peter here to back up these huevos, too.” (144)

The fact that this exchange occurs in Marci’s dream suggests an internalization of her father’s assumption of the correlation between power and the male sexual organs. Given this belief system, Marci’s desire to emerge from her victimized state is necessarily envisioned through her transformation from a

weak, vulnerable female into a strong controlling male. For this young girl, access to a penis clearly means access to the centers of male power. Marci's privileging of phallogentric power illustrates an internalization of what Audre Lorde warns against in her discourse on the master's tools.¹⁰ Her wish to change her body to match her desire is a counterstance to patriarchal power only inasmuch as it suggests a belief in the possibility of a female subject acquiring agency and empowerment—though it comes at the cost of this subject's female body and subjectivity.

The probability of such subversion, however, is minimal, since as Albert Memmi cautions, the two feasible options for colonized subjects, assimilation and revolt, both are defined by inevitable impossibility and failure. Of revolt Memmi notes: "The colonized fights in the name of the very values of the colonizer, uses his techniques of thought and his methods of combat. It must be added that this is the only action that the colonizer understands" (1969, 29). To stage a revolt against the colonizer's values thus is to conform to and be translated by the standards of this very same imperialist power if one is to be heard and acknowledged.¹¹ For Marci, at least initially, her struggle against female powerlessness and invisibility is limited by her conformity to existing patriarchal and phallogentric ideologies. Rather than establishing a new center, or destroying the primacy of the previous center, Marci simply wishes for the proper (male) body with which to acquire access to this traditional center of power. Her tool of choice, a penis, will not dismantle the structures of power that keep her silent and invisible as a queer Chicana. Marci's dreams for power and control over her own body, life, and destiny are defined by her limited understanding of gender fluidity. She has not yet arrived at the possibility that the desires she has for power and pleasure might be divorced from the male sex and body for which she prays.

The Privilege of Desire

In addition to providing access to pleasure and power, Marci also believes a “birdy” will afford her access to particular privileged desires, these being the principal motivating factor behind her frequent requests to be changed into a boy. Initially, when Marci reveals the impetus behind her pleas to God, she suggests a distinctly fluid paradigm of gender, sex, and sexuality: “It’s not because I think I’m a boy, though sometimes it sure seems like I am. It’s because I like girls...Maybe I was born this way” (9). Marci recognizes the impossibility of her desire for girls when housed within her own girl body: “Now I know you can’t be with a girl if you *are* a girl. So that’s why I have to change into a boy” (9). When the young girl experiences her first major crush on a teenage neighbor girl named Raquel, her impulse to transform grows stronger still, and she implores of God: “I like this girl named Raquel who lives next door...I don’t usually ask very much from you, but I have to change into a boy. Otherwise, how else can I be with Raquel?” (30). Yet those afforded the luxury of verbally and/or physically expressing their desire for Raquel are exclusively men and boys, including Raquel’s boyfriend and Marci’s own father. Marci observes both watching and objectifying Raquel in a way that she openly criticizes. Her father comments on Raquel’s body and seems to look right through her clothes with “X-ray vision,” and Raquel’s boyfriend offers an even more penetrating gaze, according to Marci’s interpretation; he looks at her face as though “he was going to drill her head to the garage door” (39). In both instances, Marci observes the male gaze to be unacceptably invasive, entering into Raquel’s body, infiltrating her space in a violent manner. Marci does not consider her own desiring gaze in such negative way, likening the experience of being with Raquel to an encounter with “the holy spirit” or eating large quantities of candy (26–27). Yet when Raquel looks at Marci, she does so “with eyes that [go] straight into mine, and down in my stomach. It felt like I was the one now being drilled into a wall”

(42). Here the invasive gaze is subverted as Raquel returns it, not as an object of desire, but as an active subject with a gaze and perspective of her own.

Although Marci understands that her desire for girls makes her different, she never interprets this difference as a problem of desire, but rather of the body from which the desire emerges. She is confident of her need for a male body and often contextualizes her request as a desire to fit within what she perceives to be Raquel's heteronormative framework of desire: "I like this girl named Raquel who lives next door...I want to marry her, but I think she'll want to marry a boy" (30). Marci believes that a male body will serve to normalize her desires and give her access to Raquel, who, she notes, "won't give me the time of day unless I turn into a boy" (31). Although she repeatedly requests a different body, Marci never asks God to change her desire for girls into a heteronormative attraction to boys. She never questions the validity of her desires, viewing them as the central subjectivity around which all other identities may be adjusted accordingly. In other words, her desires are essential to the subject she is, whereas she interprets her gender and sex as the malleable entities to be transformed. Under threats of violence, fears of invisibility and impossibility, Marci refuses to propose a solution to God in which her desires shift to match her body. Marci conceives only of a body that will conform to match her desires.

Because of her collaboration with heteronormative and patriarchal models of desire, Marci is unable to see how her desires are possible within her female body. Yet when cloaked in the anonymity of a confessional, Marci decides to reveal her feelings to her priest. When she is finished confessing, the priest responds, with a chuckle, that her feelings are not bad, but perhaps simply a little precocious, and suggests that in addition to saying several "Our Fathers and Hail Marys," she should consider waiting to act upon her attraction to girls. Marci is elated at the response. "He said it was okay to squeeze chichis.

I was happy. But then, wait a minute, I forgot we were in the confessional. He can't tell who I am. He thinks I'm a boy!" (72). Yet even this realization does not dampen Marci's happiness. "I told the truth to that priest and didn't have to lie. He acted like everything I said was normal. It didn't even seem like my sins were that bad. I don't know what he would have done if he knew I was a girl. But I didn't care because the worst was over" (73). Marci's interpretation of the priest's comments reifies her belief that her body is the site that must be transformed, rather than her desires, which, via the priest's reassurances are in effect sanctioned by the Catholic Church as valid and acceptable. For Marci, speaking her desires represents a major step in making her sexual and gendered subjectivities possible. The anonymity of the confessional provides Marci with a temporary space from which to normalize her desires and speak her truth. Once she locates this site and a free access to language, she is able to give voice to these desires, shattering the silence that has surrounded so much of her existence. Yet again, the subversion is only partial, since the imbalances of power and privilege between male/masculine and female/feminine remain intact—even in the darkness of the confessional.

Adrienne Rich's conceptualization of compulsory heterosexuality suggests that "lesbian desire comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women" (239). Societal fears of such affronts to male power are quickly disarmed by setting female conformity to heterosexuality as the default mode of being. Such a paradigm marginalizes and/or erases the possibility of alternative subjectivities. Marci believes that the priest assumes she is a boy, matching the subject's body to the desire voiced and thereby upholding a heterosexist view of desire. Yet in spite of such a heteronormative interpretation of her confessions, she is heartened by having spoken her desire as well as having confirmed the normalization of this desire; by her interpretation,

and what she believes to be the priest's as well, her attraction to women is acceptable when offered up from a male body. The sooner she can invoke the transformation of her body, the sooner her desires will be made possible.

Queer Community: Coalitional Politics and Familiar Alterity

As the story unfolds, Marci is able to discover new possibilities. Even as her sexual, gendered, cultural, and spiritual subjectivities differ greatly from those around her, she manages to identify community within her limited network of family and friends. Hope is afforded via a shift from the impossible to the possible as she learns to flesh out her own *sitio y lengua*. The discovery of coalitional bonds between other “queer” or “queered” subjects—so as to create semblances of family and community—comes in the form of a recognition of similar or shared difference, a concept I term *familiar alterity*. Familiar alterity expresses a recognition of difference that is shared. As it brings together alienated subjects, it shatters the isolation of marginalization. Additionally, familiar alterity suggests the productive tension between difference and sameness—being unified with others through a commonality of difference. We are the same because we are different. This conceptualization also consciously alludes to familial connections and the queering of heteronormative family structures. Such families are brought together, defined, and strengthened by a shared sense of exclusion and exile from a heteronormative mainstream as well as a mindful commitment to coalitional politics. Chela Sandoval defines coalitional politics as “to interpellate connection-by-affinity: to call up the proximities-of-being that can ally individual citizen-subjects in the great global exchange of capital” (2002, 20). A focus on critical closeness or similarity broadens agency and experience from individual to collective. Such collectives are especially useful in studying the lives of marginalized people, who are routinely denied the privileges of cultural citizenship based on their differences from a perceived norm: a queer couple denied the rights and privileges of marriage, a person of color refused full

consideration in an Anglo-run company, a woman earning a fraction of the salary of a man while performing the same job. In each of these situations, failure to perform the norm (heterosexual, Anglo, or male) results in a lessening or removal of rights for the individual who differs from the majority, or perceived default, category. In Sandoval's vision of affinity, however, citizenship is rewarded on the basis of this very difference rather than on conformity to an imagined norm.¹²

The practice of a coalitional politics is especially significant for Marci, as an isolated and Othered subject. Such circumstances as hers, of social solitude, are critical because they initiate a trajectory of nonexistence: Marci does not *see* anyone like herself; therefore, there must not *be* anyone else like her. She perceives herself as not only invisible but impossible; hence her multiple pleas to God for a corporeal transformation to make her desires possible. The establishment of coalitional structures, of family and community, underlines the presence and possibility of marginalized subjects. Coalitions, family structures, and community combat silence and solitude: we are *not* alone. When Marci sees others, such as a famous transsexual woman, a young cousin who transitions from male to female, and a feminine neighbor boy, who resemble her in their difference, she sees that what and who she is are possible.

As her journey evolves, Marci witnesses several modes of queer subjectivity that deviate from the norms of gender, sex, and sexuality as established by the authorities in her world: her parents, her school, her religion, and her limited community of relatives and friends. In her reaction to such encounters of difference—whether it be physical appearance, bodily transformations, or gendered behaviors—in the public figure of Christine Jorgensen, in her cousin Raylene, and in her childhood friend Randy, we are able to trace Marci's path of reconciliation with her own queer subjectivity, as well as the alliances and coalitions available to her as such a subject: Othered but not alone. Early in

the novel, as Marci explains her need to “become a boy,” she grapples with the perceived impossibilities of such a conversion. She anticipates her listener’s disbelief, offering as proof: “Anything can happen. It happened to my cousin, right here in my own back yard. Raylene is a girl. But when she was born, she was a boy” (25). Marci’s own disbelief in the situation prompts her to interrogate her mother further for details on Raylene’s transformation. Largely, Marci is troubled by the way Raylene’s situation disrupts the bodily binary of male and female sex. When her mother attributes the occurrence to a doctor’s error, Marci is quick to question this explanation. “How do you make that kind of mistake? You’re either a boy, or a girl. Couldn’t they tell it was a boy? Didn’t she have a birdy?” (25). Marci’s comprehension of Raylene’s situation suffers from an inability to transcend the boundaries of a binary system. She possesses no language with which to describe the concept of a fluid gender identity.

Much like her perception of her own mismatched body, Marci identifies corporeality as the primary determinant upon which all other identity categorizations depend. Since Raylene began life as “Ray,” her body must have been male. What additional factors could have been present to alter the doctor’s diagnosis of her sex months later? Marci’s young mind questions both the “mistake” of classifying Raylene as a boy and, especially, the physical process through which such a mistake is rectified: “Mom, if they named her Ray, then she must have had a birdy. So what happened to it?” (25). The privileging of visibility emerges again here in Marci’s strong resolve to *see* Raylene as a girl. Since her mother reveals Raylene’s secret only after the young child has moved with her family to another state, Marci expresses a need not only to understand this change, but to witness it for herself. “I wanted to see what [Raylene] looked like, and if she still acted like a boy. I wondered if she was going to like girls like me” (26). Her desire to *see* Raylene seems an attempt to confirm or disprove her growing concept of gender, sex, and

sexuality as unruly and unpredictable categories. Marci struggles to reconnect the socially severed links between them. Will a shift in Raylene's body prompt additional changes in her gender (how she acts) or in her sexuality (who she desires)? Sexual identity, for Marci, seems to be a confusing jumble of excess and lack. She lacks the male genitalia to authorize her desire for girls. For Raylene, following her transformation into a girl, Marci can only conceive of the excess represented by the penis. Although she has been socialized to accept a binary mapping of gender and sex, this cousin's experience clouds the clear distinctions between male and female and suggests that bodies can be every bit as blurry as the genders they perform.

Marci's infant cousin Raylene thus represents the first piece of evidence to justify Marci's desired transformation, as well as proof of the slippery nature of gender, sex, and the bodies that house them. Her disconnect between body and mind are echoed in the mystery of Raylene's transformation, and though Marci is unable to elicit anything but vague traces of the story from her clearly embarrassed mother, she knows enough to draw parallels between this and her own experience. Defiantly, in the face of her listener's doubt, the young girl reassures us that anything *is* possible, even Marci herself: "Just like Raylene, it could happen to me" (26). Still, the possibility she entertains for herself continues to be limited by her compliance with heterosexist norms: she is possible, but only after her transformation into a boy. Yet even as she assures herself and the readers of the continued possibility of a bodily transformation, Marci grows increasingly concerned about her own unanswered prayers. "Where are you God? If you can read my mind, do it and show me you're real. Talk to me!" (222). She considers the practicality of a bodily transformation later in adolescence, "I had a funny feeling it wasn't going to happen. You kinda think if it was gonna happen he would have changed me by now so that everyone, including me, could've gotten used to it" (222).

In contrast to the proximity of her cousin Raylene (“in my own backyard”), Marci’s encounter with another queer subject reaches across social divides of race, class, gender, sex, and sexuality. Marci’s detective-like curiosity often brings her to the local public library, where, under the cloak of science, she is able to ask questions about “a girl changing into a boy” (28). Her hope quickly deflates when the librarian responds, “I’ve been a librarian for seventeen years and I’ve never heard of that happening. Nor have I come across it in any books” (28). The theme of impossibility is thus reiterated through the librarian, an authorized proprietor of knowledge. Without a written history, without the traces of queer subjectivity in any locatable site, Marci has little evidence with which to prove its existence in general, or her own existence specifically.

A few moments later, however, the librarian approaches Marci to show her a book from the adult section of the library, a biography titled *The Christine Jorgensen Story*.¹³ Marci is initially unimpressed, feeling disconnected from the book’s author and her experience. The librarian explains that “this [is the] story of a man who decided he was living in the wrong body and got an operation to become a woman” (29). Marci quickly differentiates her own experience from Jorgensen’s, explaining, “it wasn’t me. I didn’t even really want a birdy. I just wanted Raquel” (29). Although she clearly recognizes a sense of familiar alterity, in terms of the shifting between female and male, Marci underlines the division between transsexual/transgendered sexuality and her own queer sexuality. Ultimately, in spite of Marci’s repeated requests to “be a boy” and have a “birdy,” it is not the corporeal transformation that she dreams of, but rather the privileges that such a body will afford her: the authority to express and act upon her desires for her friend Raquel.

A much nearer manifestation of familiar alterity presents itself via Marci’s intimate connection to a neighbor friend, a boy named Randy, whose discomfort in his own body at first elicits feelings not of empathy but of

hostility from the novel's narrator: "I felt really mad when I looked at Randy Torres. He was a big sissy kid who lived down the street. He didn't like football, even though he would have been good as a tackle" (31). Marci's anger seems to stem from her envy of Randy's boy body and the opportunities it affords him. This antagonism wanes, and she later attempts to sympathize with his situation and connect it to her own. "Randy looked sad, and I felt sorry for him for about a second. How did Randy end up a boy and me a girl? I knew I could throw a ball so hard it would've made his dad's hand sting. But if Randy ever wanted to be with Raquel, he'd have a better chance than me" (32). So in spite of Marci's ability to perform masculinity—in terms of strength and athleticism—better than Randy, his desires for girls will be authorized by society in a way that Marci's will never be. Exasperated by the lack of logic through which Randy is made a boy and she a girl, Marci begins to focus her attention on authority and agency. She wonders, "who got to make the choice of what you were when you were born. I memorized this question to ask Ms. Buck [the librarian] later" (32). Her question reveals a view of gender and sex as imposed or assigned rather than as identities one has the agency to choose for oneself.

At this point in the novel, Marci is unable to envision a sense of self that she defines and controls from within. She defers instead to external authorities—her teachers, the librarian, the priest, and her parents. Her only recourse are prayer and confession. In this way, Catholicism, often an oppressive force for queer subjects, becomes an empowering medium; prayer enables Marci to speak her dreams, wishes, and desires in contrast to the silence that surrounds most of her daily life. At the same time, the Church attempts to regulate Marci's voice by requiring her to promise not to ask her teacher questions "of any kind, ever" (21). The Mother Superior further belittles Marci when she assures her that "[her] questions do no one any good" (21). Marci's teachers

are part of the typical social process of silencing dissenting voices and unruly subjects, especially when they make clear that it is God who wants to strip her of her voice and discourse.

Her teachers' efforts are largely ineffective at containing Marci's curiosity, however, and religion does present Marci with compelling introductions to the possibilities of queer subjectivity, which occur, ironically, in a confessional. In the novel, there are only two people to whom Marci is able to confess her desires for girls. The first is the priest, Father Chacón, to whom, in a fleeting moment of anonymity and linguistic freedom, Marci confesses before her first communion. This is a blind confession—Father Chacón is unable to see Marci's face or confirm her identity as a girl. The anonymity converts the confessional into a safe space for Marci to declare her very first expression of queer desire.¹⁴

It is the anonymity of the confessional that also reveals another queer connection, between the priest, Father Chacón, and her father's brother, known to her as Uncle Tommy. At a church fundraising dinner, Marci witnesses Uncle Tommy and Father Chacón emerging from a confessional booth together, flustered, nervous, and laughing. Although at this moment Marci is unable to unravel the mystery surrounding this incident, she immediately reacts to the oddity of the situation: two men in a small sacred space, as well as the secrecy underlying their encounter. Breathless and confused, she returns to join her family, wondering silently, "What were they doing inside that confessional? I wanted to know bad, but I was too scared to ask" (78). On the brink of understanding this queer connection, Marci must carefully weigh her desire to know Uncle Tommy and Father Chacón's secret against the fear of revealing her own queer secret.

Each of Marci's encounters with queer experience provides her with a sense of the possibilities for community defined in difference and enables her to question what she has believed to be the limits of her girl body. With a sense of her priest's now familiar alterity, Marci reinterprets their earlier confessional exchange: "Remember when I was in confession with Father Chacón and I told him I liked girls and he didn't even care? And remember I thought it was because he thought I was a boy? Well, maybe he knew I wasn't. If he knew I was a girl and I said I liked girls, then can you see why he didn't care?" (136). Her new understanding of Father Chacón's desires leads Marci to contemplate the possibility of her own desires, not as the inherent product of the boy she should be, but as experienced from the body of the girl she is. The introduction of this new possibility enables the protagonist to move closer to Ana Castillo's conceptualization of an "erotic whole self." For Castillo, the separation of sexuality and self for Chicanas and Latinas yields a potential for destruction far beyond the scope of the local and individual:

All of our conflicts with dominant society, all of the backlashes we suffer when attempting to seek some kind of justice from society, are ultimately traceable to the repression of our sexuality and our spiritual energies as human beings—which are at no time during our breathing existence on Earth apart from the rest of who we are. (1994, 136)

Not only does Castillo assert the destructive potential of alienating sexual subjectivity, but she further suggests that resolution of the fragmentation of sexuality results in the empowered "erotic whole self" that brings together mind, body, and soul into a unified vision of self (143).

Given Castillo's framework, one might argue that Marci never veers from the path of erotic whole selfhood, since she is unwavering in her determination

to undergo the transformation she deems necessary in order to express and ultimately act upon her desires for another female subject. Yet once she is able to reconcile her experience of these desires from within her gendered female body, Marci actively begins to reject the fragmentation and incompleteness that motivated her earlier wish for corporeal transformation.

Speaking Silences and Decoding Difference

In terms of Marci's *lengua*, though she does not arrive at a comfortable term of self-definition by the close of the novel, she actively engages with the available linguistic descriptors, and takes on the role of detective as she deciphers the meanings of adult references such as "queer," "jotito," and "homosexual," especially as they pertain to her family, her community, and herself. Self-definition is initially filtered through a dominant view of the limits of female sexuality and desire, and Marci must forge her own interpretive model for understanding and articulating her desiring self.

The issue of Marci's space is intertwined with her search for an authentic and unaffected voice. She comes to a preliminary understanding of the language that surrounds gender, sexuality, religion, and difference through her own investigations and observations. She begins with an analysis of the language spoken by those around her, namely her father, who frequently directs the term "queer" at anyone who displeases or confounds him. Coupling this with dictionary research, Marci begins to formulate a bank of meanings from which to understand the concept of queerness. Initially, Eddie uses the term to describe churchgoers or, as he terms them, "holy rollers." Subsequently, he spits the word as a form of insult during a heated argument with his brother, Marci's Uncle Tommy. Through her research, Marci first encounters the descriptor "homosexual" and begins to unravel its connection to Uncle Tommy's earlier encounter with the priest in the confessional and her own desires for girls. Still,

Marci's view of her own sexual difference is limited by her lack of exposure to the related terminology. Language is paramount in Marci's inability to understand her queer sexuality, both because she does not understand the lexicon, and because she does not have access to a community that is defined by such descriptors. As she pieces together the connections between religion, sexuality, and difference, she attempts to place herself within a queer continuum:

So if being in the church makes you a homosexual queer, or a man loving a man, or lady loving a lady makes you a homosexual queer, then this must be what I am. I'm a girl. I like Raquel. That makes me a girl liking a girl, which is a homosexual queer. And since I like God, Baby Jesus, and Mary, and they're the church, then I must be a double homosexual queer...But then what happens if I want to be a boy. Does that make me a triple? (137)

However, even as Marci approaches a linguistic mapping of her different desires, she still lacks a more immediate experience of familiar alterity, since each of the members of her queer community are male or transsexual, and none of them is able to speak to Marci's exact situation as a young girl attracted to other girls. Audre Lorde argues that the master's tools are unable to deconstruct the master's house and proposes that rather than defining oneself and one's struggles in terms of prior revolutionary acts, women of color might increase the efficacy of their movements by working with homegrown tools (100). Indeed, one of Marci's obstacles in her search for *lengua* requires her to move beyond the discursive tools of patriarchy and heterosexism and into a new consciousness and an acceptance of her unique voice and language.

At the close of the novel, Marci and her sister engage in a final horrifying struggle with their abusive father. As he beats Marci, Corin grabs her father's

rifle and shoots him in the back. The girls seize the chaotic opportunity, amid policemen and sirens, to escape to a bus headed toward their grandmother's home in New Mexico. They are received with open arms, and although their parents never acknowledge the truth about the shooting, they do not make any attempt to bring the girls home again. In the movement from their father's misogynist dictatorship to their grandmother's loving matriarchy, the girls are finally able to enjoy a structural sense of *sitio* and the freedom to speak and think freely as they develop their own *lenguas*.

Marci's struggle with gender and sexuality continues even as she elects to stop attending church services. She now expresses distrust of both the institution of Catholicism and the powers held within it. Her rejection of the physical structure of the church and the doctrine offered by the priests and nuns stands as a moment of agency and autonomy. Largely, Marci's prayers are supplications for the changes she believed would correct the deviance of her mismatched body and desire. At the close of the novel, Marci arrives at a semblance of acceptance: "All of a sudden it hits me. I'm never gonna be a boy. No matter how hard I pray, or how good I try to be, I'll always be a girl...If I'm gonna stay a girl I'd better figure out what to do" (223). It is in her acceptance that Marci begins to enact a mode of creative subversion. Rather than seek out a solution that allows her to conform to societal expectations, she begins to assess her body and desires as immutable components of her being, not anomalies to be remedied through divine or medical intervention. When she transforms her spirituality from a faith in God to a belief in her own self-worth and possibility, Marci moves toward a self-designed "alternative spirituality" (Anderson 2005, 24). This spirituality rejects the male-centered and Eurocentric structures of power that discouraged her from speaking, questioning, or desiring in ways that were intuitive for her. Rather than a simplistic reversal of male dominance and whiteness, Marci and Corin are able to locate *sitio* outside male dominance and

abuse, and in spite of Marci's persistent desire to become a strong and powerful boy, she ultimately discovers the power, within her own female body, to free herself and her sister. Perhaps this initial encounter with a female-centered community enables Marci also to make a final movement toward self-acceptance and the related language needed to express her queer self.

Chicana Girlhoods/Lesbian Possibilities

In *With Her Machete in Her Hands: Reading Chicana Lesbians*, Catrióna Rueda Esquibel offers a mapping of literary representations of Chicana girlhood as potential spaces of sexual exploration, self-definition, and agency. Although she terms many of these spaces "restrictive," she also posits that "young Chicanas are encouraged to form lifelong female friendships, and it is the intimacy of these relationships that often provides the context for lesbian desire" (2006, 91). This understanding of *comadrazgo*—as a system of support for women's relationships with each other—is largely absent from Trujillo's text. In part, this is due to the familial violence that shatters any sense of collectivity, spreading victimization equally among the female family members, pitting father against mother, mother against daughters, and daughters against both their parents. Certainly Marci's struggle to understand her own desires is complicated by the absence of a community or familial tradition of *comadrazgo*; however, at the close of the narrative, she encounters a coalitional connection with another young girl, Robbie, who confesses to a similar desire for girls. This brief moment bears witness to the possibilities of Rueda Esquibel's theory of Chicana girlhoods. When asked by her new friend if she believes their desire is a sin, Marci quickly replies, "No, I don't" (241). The immediacy with which she responds illustrates how her new spirituality makes a space for her desire and allows her to speak this desire without shame. When the two share their first kiss, Marci is left speechless but narrates her final thoughts to the reader: "I didn't know what to do or think. But for once I could say I felt so good it didn't matter" (242).

For Marci Cruz, a sense of self is disrupted and disjointed through her repeated requests for a male body. Yet, by the close of the novel, Marci's fragmentation diminishes and her body is made whole by rejecting the impossibility of her desires while asserting her unique, gendered identity and her active subjecthood. Her final statement, reveling in the pleasure of her connection to Robbie, rather than considering its social implications, completes Marci's circle of self-definition. In the passage that began this article, Marci expressed her desire to have a boy's body, and although she ultimately finds this wish impossible, she manages to find resolution to her seeming corporeal unrest. In her prioritization of pleasure ("I felt so good it didn't matter"), she is able to transgress the limitations of heteronormativity and fashion a new desire that involves self-definition and self-expression.

Trujillo's novel and its strong, young protagonist effectively address the issues of multiple marginalization and the consequent societal perception of a fragmented subjectivity. Marci is forced to confront worlds that refuse to see her unique and multiple layers of subjectivity. Daily, she attempts to reconcile a world incapable of seeing the queer Chicana she is becoming. Rather than rebel against the limited options afforded to her by dominant society, Marci initially internalizes the sexist and heterosexist attitudes from her surroundings, believing that her queer female subjectivity is in fact impossible. Trujillo's narrative offers a glimpse into self-recovery as Marci is able to contextualize her own desires for girls within a queer community, thereby enabling her to grasp her ultimate possibility. Trujillo's narrative evidences the practice of storytelling to illustrate how the lack of visible queer Latina representation has less to do with impossibilities of being than failures of seeing. For Trujillo's protagonist, her place to begin—a wholly unique *sitio y lengua*—emerges at the close of the novel as a newly discovered alternative to dichotomies and comes from the knowledge that her identification as girl does not preclude her desire for other

girls. Her desires, her body, her experience, and her subjectivity move into the realm of productive and passionate possibility.

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Notes

¹ Trujillo was awarded the Marmol Prize in 2003 for *What Night Brings*. The novel was also a runner-up for the Astraea Lesbian Writers Fund Award and received an honorable mention in the Writers at Work competition. Esteemed authors Sandra Cisneros and Dorothy Allison, alongside mainstream publications such as *Hispanic Magazine*, *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Lambda Book Report*, have praised *What Night Brings* for its powerful narrative and memorable characters.

² As a designator of sexual subjectivity, the term *queer* acquired popularity in the 1990s as a broader alternative to the more limiting terms *lesbian* and *gay*, although some dislike it as a nongendered referent.

³ Bernice Zamora's foundational piece "So Not to Be Mottled" offers a poetic manifesto of intersectional identities (1993, 78).

⁴ Octavio Paz's discourse on gender, and especially female sexuality, presents a problematic view, arising from a static and binary view of human subjectivity. In particular, see his paradigm of *la chingada/el chingón* for a rigidly dichotomous representation of gender expectations and his analysis of *el pachuco* for a similar elucidation of ethnic and cultural identity (1961). Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness intervenes into these dichotomies, offering alternatives to "either/or" subjectivity (1987).

⁵ Like Anzaldúa, Jacqueline M. Martínez argues for the subversive potential of Chicana lesbian subjectivity. Martínez focuses on the seeming unintelligibility of Chicana lesbian identity within an Anglo-dominant heteronormative worldview. Martínez suggests that through the enacting of "radical ambiguities," Chicana lesbian subjectivity challenges colonialist oppressions and offers the promise of radical transformation (2000, 62-64).

⁶ bell hooks theorizes about the distinction between a privileged view of home as a safe and "politically neutral" site and a reclamation of the notion of home by African American women as a site of resistance and empowerment. Marci is unable to maneuver this transformation and ultimately she must abandon her home for an alternative "homeplace" (1990).

⁷ For another Chicana lesbian account of the gender politics of childhood playthings, see Monica Palacios (1998).

⁸ Pérez notes that envy of the male phallus is largely a myth of male “centralist” theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault (1991, 173). However, Marci’s strong desire for a penis seems to necessitate an alternate version of penis envy, since Marci wishes for male genitalia so as to authorize her attraction to girls and for the purposes of sexual pleasure. Cherríe Moraga interprets her own childhood dream of a female body with an “out of control” penis as a suggestion of sexual potency and the desire to move sexually from penetrated to penetrator (1983, 119). Certainly, the relevance of the phallus cannot be untangled from lesbian desire and sexuality, and Marci’s emphasis on the pleasure and privilege of the penis illustrates one of many points along a continuum of lesbian/queer female desire.

⁹ Zavella’s interviews with Chicana and Mexican women reveal patriarchal strategies for silencing women’s desires. The women interviewed also suggested a challenge to the virgin-whore dichotomy with the role of “la escandalosa,” who emerges from sexual repression to embraces her desires and pleasures (2003, 228). Trujillo’s novel suggests the history of una escandalosa in the making, since Marci’s sexuality remains largely a private identity.

¹⁰ Lorde advises against any subversive act translated into the language and tools of a ruling power, since “the master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house” (1984, 110). Her discussion of the insufficiency of an oppressor’s tactics to interrupt systems of oppression insists on a critical foundation of autochthonous theories of resistance around which U.S. Latina scholars such as Emma Pérez (*sitio y lengua*), Aurora Levins Morales (certified organic intellectual), and the Latina Feminist Group (*Papelitos Guardados*) have developed frameworks of individual and collective identity.

¹¹ Many feminist and postcolonial theorists have discussed the role of language in frameworks of colonial power and subsequent revolutions waged by colonized subjects. Emma Pérez posits that both gender and racial oppressions necessitate that women of color find alternate modes of communication apart from “sexual-racial violence mirrored in language, in words. A speculum of conquest to ‘penetrate’ further” (1991, 175). Frantz Fanon notes, “A man who has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (1967, 18). However, under the structures of colonial power, Fanon positions the acquisition of language as a complicated transformation for the colonized subject. Therefore, the colonized subject who can successfully learn the colonizer’s language and act out cultural norms in essence “becomes whiter,” at least on the level of social performance. Concomitantly, any revolution voiced using a colonial language risks being defined and perhaps doomed by a conformity to the colonizer’s ideals.

¹² Because of the focus on inclusion and familial ties, I feel the concept of familiar alterity has uniquely viable applications for the LGBTQ community as well as for people of color. However, the framework is relevant in many other circumstances wherein individuals seek community under the bond of shared difference and collective alienation from a ruling majority.

¹³ Jorgensen, born George Jorgensen, made the transition from male to female in 1952, emerging

as one of the first widely publicized transsexuals in the United States popular media; see Jorgensen 2000.

¹⁴ Here again I'm using *queer* not necessarily in the sense of lesbian, but simply non-normative sexual desire. Marci understands the stigma that will likely be attached to her desires, and she is cautious about expressing them only when they may not be tied to her name or identity. Her fear of negative response situates her desires as queer long before she identifies them as lesbian or homosexual.

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