

ETHICS OF CARE IN CHICANA LESBIAN WRITERS

IMELDA MARTÍN JUNQUERA
Universidad de León *

To Catriona Rueda Esquibel, in memoriam

Abstract

Chicana Lesbians: The Girls our Mothers Warned Us About (1991) by Carla Trujillo challenged conventional positions and ideology about gender and sexual roles when it was published. The controversial issue of the ethics of care, discussed and understood in ecofeminist theories as the imperative of heteropatriarchal societies towards women to become caretakers, finds in these texts reflections from the queer identities of their authors, transforming their actions into positive interactions. In this volume, relationships of sorority, expressing love and care for one another abound as the writers in the compilation explore new alternatives of building families aside from heteropatriarchal role models. Among these explorations, the different poems and essays included in the volume established a communication through eroticism and sexuality, and discussed their implications openly, in order to overcome the problematics of an imposed heterosexuality and, even, an imposed motherhood. This collection expresses how, thanks to all this previous work by writers and critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, Emma Pérez or Carla Trujillo herself, whose stories are included in the volume, Chicana lesbian writers today can escape essentialist visions that place women and queers as closer to nature in order to undervalue both and find the justification to oppress them. On the contrary, Trujillo's volume opens an avenue towards a more post anthropocentric attitude, exercising empathy towards the human and the more-than-human world in relation to making these writers aware of the influence of their origins, and the embracement of their roots through the expression of love and caring for other women.

Keywords: ecofeminism, lesbian, queer, ethics of care, Chicana, sorority.

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ÉTICA DEL CUIDADO EN ESCRITORAS CHICANAS LESBIANAS

Resumen

El volumen de Carla Trujillo (1991) *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls our Mothers Warned Us About* retaba en el momento de su publicación posicionamientos e ideologías sobre roles de género y sexo. El controvertido tema de la ética del cuidado, debatido y entendido en las teorías ecofeministas como el imperativo impuesto por sociedades patriarcales para convertir a las mujeres en cuidadoras, encuentra en estos textos reflexiones desde las identidades *queer* de sus autoras, quienes transforman sus acciones en interacciones positivas. En la compilación mencionada abundan las relaciones de sororidad, en las que expresan el amor y el cuidado mutuo, a la vez que se exploran nuevas alternativas de construcción de familia, fuera de modelos heteropatriarcales. Entre estas exploraciones, los poemas y ensayos incluidos en el volumen se comunicaban entonces a través del erotismo y la sexualidad, debatiendo abiertamente sus implicaciones, intentando superar la problemática de una sexualidad e, incluso, una maternidad impuesta. Gracias al trabajo previo de escritoras y críticas como Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, Emma Pérez o la propia Carla Trujillo, cuyas historias aparecen en esta compilación, las escritoras chicanas lesbianas actuales evitan caer en visiones esencialistas que colocan a las mujeres y sujetos *queer* cerca de la naturaleza para devaluarlas y encontrar la justificación de su opresión. Al contrario, el volumen de Trujillo abre nuevos caminos hacia una tendencia más posantropocéntrica, más empática hacia el mundo humano y más que humano, para hacer a estas escritoras más conscientes de la influencia de sus orígenes, abrazando sus raíces con expresión de amor y cuidado hacia otras mujeres.

Palabras clave: ecofeminismo, lesbiana, queer, ética del cuidado, chicana, sororidad.

1. INTRODUCTION

Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About, the collection edited by Carla Trujillo in 1991, has been acknowledged by literary critics such as Diana Rebolledo in *Women Singing in the Snow* (1995) and Catriona Rueda Esquibel in *With Her Machete in her Hand* (2009) as the first attempt to render visibility to the literary creation of a number of Chicana writers¹, who, putting forward their sexuality during

¹ Trujillo (1991), Rebolledo (1995) and Rueda Esquibel (2009). Juanita Ramos' *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians: An Anthology* was published earlier (Ramos, 1987). Although Chicana lesbian writers such as Anzaldúa were included, the editor was Puerto Rican and the contributors had different ethnicities and nationalities.

the last decades of the twentieth century, struggled to find a definition within the multiple variables intersecting in the building of their personal identities. Since *This Bridge Called my Back*, Moraga & Anzaldúa (1981) began a resistance to colonization; particularly, highlighting matters related to variables of race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality. In her later works, Anzaldúa would quote Audre Lorde's essay «The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House» to remind readers of the urgent need for Chicanas to decolonize the discourse of identity politics through subjective in-betweenness or «nepantla, the mid way point between the conscious and the unconscious» (Anzaldúa, 2009: 189). The evolution of the idea of intersectionality has run parallel to the concept of the borderlands, focusing on the aspects that unite certain women and minoritized collectives in their fight against the dominance of the master, represented by patriarchy and colonization.

Over thirty years have gone by since the publication of *Chicana Lesbians* by Trujillo; it is my aim to address how issues related to an imposed heterosexuality and even motherhood are dealt with in some of the texts in the collection from a theoretical perspective related to ecofeminist philosophies, where empathy among species and their members is enacted and emphasized, as they are contemplated more specifically from the ethics of care.

The writings I have selected to be analyzed here: Cathy Arellano's «Yeah, I Want a Woman like my Mother because I Couldn't Have Her», Cherrie Moraga's «La Ofrenda», Emma Pérez's «Gulf Dreams», and Terri de la Peña «Beyond El Camino Real», express what Anzaldúa points out in her presentation to the exhibit *Bearing Witness* by Chilean-American artist Liliana Wilson: «*Bearing Witness* portrays a double or dual-conscious consciousness. Border artists are in the precarious position of having our feet in different worlds: the dominant, the ethnic, and the queer, which often induces a double being-ness» (Anzaldúa, 2009: 277). In order to give a more current vision of the issues Chicana lesbian writers engage in today, I incorporate an analysis of Norma Cantú's «A Love Poem, Alas» included in her *Meditación Fronteriza* (Cantú, 2019: 44-45) and a review of *Our Lady of Controversy* (Gaspar de Alba & López, 2011).

According to the lesbian writers and artists mentioned above, they have found empowerment in uniting and exercising resistance together against the common threat of heteropatriarchy. As an example, a text included in Trujillo's compilation, Emma Pérez' essay also opts for defending how enriching she finds the experiences of female gatherings and how this activism has transformed her life deeply:

I prefer to think of myself as one who places women, especially Third World women and lesbians, in the forefront of my priorities. I am committed to women's organizations because in those spaces we revitalize, we laugh, we mock the oppressor, we mock each other's seriousness, and we take each other serious. This is a moment of support, this is living the ideal, if only momentarily to give, to nurture, to support each other in a racist, Western, homophobic society (Pérez, 1991b: 178).

Besides this sorority, another characteristic common to the works I analyze here is the authors' identification with the land and traditional cultural spaces, as well as their development of a deep feeling of belonging. These very attitudes of place attachment have proven key to overcoming the problem of being considered «vendidas» or traitors by the Chicano communities, as Saldívar-Hull (2000) discusses. They suffered, on the one hand, the accusation of having embraced white middle-class feminism and, on the other hand, discrimination, a visible lack of inclusion in the mainstream American culture because of their ethnicity. Both Anzaldúa and Moraga rebelled in their writings against this accusation of being sell-outs which they and other Chicana feminists faced in the 1970s and 80s when fellow Chicano writers accused them of abandoning the fight for racial equity and justice in favor of queer claims. In fact, their vindications involved the dismantling of hierarchies established by dominating heteronormative patriarchal systems, thus challenging all forms of oppression over minoritized groups. One of these oppressions results from the divide between the human and the natural world, where nature, deprived of agency or entity becomes dominated by the masculine model. Ecofeminist philosophers believe that women, on their part, suffer the same oppression as they are associated with that passive character. Working together to eliminate the domination exerted on women and nature means caring for each other (nature and women), thus creating systems of shared support, collaborative networks and

interdependence between women in order to achieve mutuality. An ethics of care from an ecofeminist perspective, as the one Karen Warren defends in her theories, is introduced in the next section.

2. ETHICS OF CARE AND QUEER ECOFEMINISM

A common theme of ecocriticism for the last decades has been the affirmation that the dissociation between human beings and the natural world has brought about the climate emergency that the Earth is suffering nowadays. On their part, ecofeminists have developed their theories uniting the principles of ecology with the claims of feminism. Plumwood (1993) focuses on how an androcentric view of the world has been extinguishing the Earth and its resources, causing its depletion, and how this same oppression has been exerted on women because of women's capabilities for reproduction and nurturing. Warren (1990) also approaches this oppression from her «logic of domination», and explains, by means of binary oppositions, how hierarchies of value and power are created. On a binary pair, there is always a privileged term which acquires superiority and therefore, justifies the domination of the other: reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature: «A logic of domination assumes that superiority justifies domination» (Warren, 2000: 47). Ecofeminism challenges these binary oppositions which are conceived in terms of value dualisms, as Warren (1996, 2000) explains in her conceptual interconnections, in which also nature and culture appear separated, opposed, devaluating nature in favor of culture. This is especially important when addressing issues related to minoritized communities, as it is the case here with Chicana lesbians. Because they do not engage in reproductive sex, supposedly, the only one acknowledged and accepted among animal species within the Western scale of values, their sexual behavior has been regarded as a threat to nature, or literally labelled as «unnatural»², by protectors of conservative

² This adjective is used by Saint Paul in his «Letter to the Romans» in the *United States Catholic Conference of Bishops Bible*: «Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males and thus received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity» (1. 26-27; online: <<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/romans>>, accessed: December 1st, 2023).

Christian beliefs. Although ecofeminists such as Mortimer-Sandilands (2010) have gathered enormous examples of same sex pairing and non-heteronormative behavior in animals and other natural species, lesbians keep being accused of challenging their biological destiny which is to find a mate to procreate.

Thus, identifying the erotic with deviancy serves to undervalue it and allows the placement of queer people at a lower level than heterosexuals, traditionally considered the normality or the representatives of reason, as opposed to nature. Women, on the contrary, remain situated in this same lower category thorough their identification with sentiments/feelings, and finally with nature. One of the main goals of ecofeminism focuses on the simultaneous liberation of women and nature and the belief that taking care of the natural world, displacing anthropocentrism and introducing a concept such as naturecultures (Haraway, 2016: 101), means to apply an effective ethics of care to both women and nature. Ecofeminism also highlights the fact that these hierarchical systems of power should be transformed into heterarchies, thus, positioning all living beings at the same level and applying a new system based on empathy or an understanding of each other, not only at the human level but to establish an effective interspecies dialogue. Both Plumwood and Warren engage in censoring these relationships that undervalue non-heteronormative subjects and initiate actions to contest them.

In the particular case of Chicana lesbian writers who critically inhabit the borderlands, as Christina Holmes discusses in *Ecological Borderlands* (Holmes, 2016), they rewrite their homelands to include the stories of invisible, dangerous or disposable inhabitants. These *borderlands* are identified also with the metaphorical space of the mind articulated by Anzaldúa and occupied by «los atravesados» in her influential work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa, 1986). In an interview with Linda Smuckler, Anzaldúa (2009: 88) gives a very illustrative answer when asked her opinion about negative projection towards queer collectives: «Today our scapegoats are the faggots, lesbians, and third world people, but in the future, it will be people from other planets or even artificial humans-androids, people born in a test tube rather than the uterus». But Holmes (2016: 9) articulates a new conception of the physical and mental space: «Once free from imperialist

symbolic configurations of the border, writers and artists begin to theorize how we can relate with each other in new ways». This inclusive and decolonizing attitude involves a demonstration of their engagement with an ethics of care both towards these other humans (including queer) and the more-than-human, regarding the latter not as mere environment, but as an equal partner in the fight against heteropatriarchal domination.

I am aware of the controversial implications of using the term 'queer'³, so the meaning I assign to it in this text has to do with the definition of non-heterosexual people, entry C in the Merriam Webster dictionary⁴: «of, relating to, or being a person whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual and/or whose gender identity is not cisgender». This same meaning appears in Gaard (1997) and is vindicated by Anzaldúa in her writings (especially, 1998), where she explains that she uses it trying at the same time not to homogenize, but to respect the differences among people who love members of the same sex. In her work, Gaard (1997: 140) defends that «the oppression of queers may be described more precisely, then, as the product of two mutually reinforcing dualisms: heterosexual /queer, and reason/the erotic». Gaard describes how nature and the erotic, as associated with queer representatives, belong in the same realm, thus, receiving less value, while culture becomes identified with hetero-normativity and is therefore, reinforced. Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson (2010: 19) explain how heteropatriarchal models are the dominant ones when humans relate to the natural world: «It is clear that bodies have been organized to interact with nature-spaces in a particularly disciplined and heterosexualized manner».

Historically and culturally, the main role assigned to a woman has been motherhood. Gaard (1998: 20) explains why women are assigned this role: «moreover, arguments that appeal to the biological 'closeness' of women and nature are more often used to justify women's 'natural' role as caregivers and child bearers rather than as bricklayers and politicians». This statement reinforces how reproductive sex has served along the history of humanity to equate women with nature, with the result of oppressing and dominating both. Focusing again on Warren and

³ I understand 'queer' here as a category that helps to destabilize sex categories; it includes non-binary identities and works as a more flexible and wider term than homosexual.

⁴ Online: <<http://www.Merriam-Webster.com>>, accessed: November 28th, 2022).

Plumwood's binary oppositions which serve to examine women's oppression, they both coincide in the fact that men stand for reason and women for nature; thus, women are born to become natural caretakers: «the angels of the house», as Coventry Patmore (1854) expressed in his homonymous poem, in which he describes the ideal of the devoted Victorian wife who submitted to her husband's desires. Unfortunately, this condition was developed to diminish women's values as human beings, since caring for others stands against reason in this hierarchical scale. In our current world, Plumwood (2002: 35) affirms that « [...] we should not be surprised to find that care and compassion for others are increasingly inexpressible in the public 'rational context', a context that is defined against the domestic sphere in which care has been confined». More recently and still prevailing, Sturgeon (2010: 104) summarizes this conflict with the statement: «In short, the politics of gender are often both the politics of reproduction and the politics of production –the intertwined ways that people produce more people, manage bringing up children».

Among the writers collaborating in Trujillo's collection, some like Ana Castillo, Martha Barrera or Emma Pérez create voices that express their complaint about the fact that the community in which they grew up expected from them to assume their «natural» role in their community and in society at large: to become caretakers and child bearers. The next section provides a reflection on the implications of imposed motherhood on Chicanas and the conflict it poses especially on Chicana lesbians as well as their difficulty of identification with traditional female role models, some of which writers and artists have been transforming to challenge heteronormativity.

3. ECOFEMINIST VIEWS ON MOTHERHOOD AND CHICANA LESBIANS

These ideas of oppression on both heterosexual and lesbian Chicanas find an expression in the creative writing and essays included in the volume compiled by Trujillo which offers a space for rebellion against this forced status of motherhood. In her own essay, «Chicana Lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicano Community», the editor states: «We are incomplete as women unless we become mothers. Many Chicanas are

socialized to believe that our chief purpose in life is to have children [...] motherhood is still seen by our culture as the final act in establishing our womanhood» (Trujillo, 1991: 190). This experience, then, is not only expected but supported in traditional Chicano communities where the value of a woman also diminishes when she reaches menopause; insisting once more in the identification of women with nature to undervalue both, they become like fields which are no longer apt for cultivating. Castillo (1991: 44) addresses this issue: «society retires women sexually (due to their loss of reproductive abilities) when they reach middle age, sometime before they undergo menopause». The response of ecofeminism reinforces this pressure on queers:

From a historical perspective, the equation of woman's «true nature» with motherhood has been used to oppress women, just as the equation of sexuality with procreation has been used to oppress both women and queers. The charge that queer sexualities are «against nature» and thus morally, physiologically, or psychologically depraved and devalued would seem to imply that nature is valued but as ecofeminists have shown, this is not the case. In Western culture, just the contrary is true: nature is devalued just as queers are devalued (Gaard, 1997: 141).

Looking at motherhood and family from a queer ecofeminist perspective, Sturgeon (2010: 106-107) reflects on the implications of the role model of the Holy Family for non-heterosexuals and why it has historically become the normative and the natural one in our society. She argues that right wing Christians and conservative religious people at large believe that the heterosexual patriarchal family is divinely created. The logic of this position, as Sturgeon contemplates it, comes from the fact that God created man and woman alongside the rest of nature, as the foundation of the ideal society he envisioned.

Following this reasoning, the example of the perfect mother resides in the Virgin Mary, whom the *Bible* describes as the woman chosen by God to give birth to his son. As unattainable as her example may seem, given the enormous value attached to virginity, which is incompatible with giving birth, however, the Virgin of Guadalupe has reached the status of the most emblematic icon of Catholic faith and of popular devotion in Latino/Latina communities. This female figure portrays, at the same time, the role model of the submissive, pure woman and the

caring and nurturing mother of the «brown race». In fact, the front cover of the 1991 edition of *Chicana Lesbians*, by Californian artist Ester Hernández titled «La Ofrenda», shows a woman wearing on her back a tattoo with the image of the Virgin, supporting these women's need of identification with cultural role models, together with the racial, ethnic and erotic vindications included in the volume. The texts included in *Chicana Lesbians* initiate a process of transformation towards the understanding of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, contemplated not as an ally of heteropatriarchal domination sanctioning oppression, but as a symbol of forced miscegenation like themselves, a product of an imposed system of values brought about by Western colonization. Anzaldúa's writings had already urged the creation of a queer genealogy and the rescue of feminine role models to claim them as their ancestry and attempt to heal the colonial wound which keeps bleeding and not scabbing.

Then, the work of Rueda Esquibel introduced, with her understanding of this influence of the Virgin of Guadalupe on Chicana lesbians, a new variable in the equation of decolonization previously discussed, which is the rebellion against imposed role models together with the importance of their transformation:

La Virgen is an impossible ideal that no flesh-and-blood woman can live up to. But after the Chicana feminist daughter rebels against her mother, La Virgen, she comes to understand her. It is through their identification of La Virgen with a human woman –one's own grandmother, one's own mother, one's self– that Chicana artists in particular have made peace with her (Rueda Esquibel, 2009: 37).

Rueda Esquibel abounds in the reconfiguration of female role models which become influential for Chicana writers and artists among which she mentions Alma Lopez and the controversy initiated by her piece on the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The image of «Our Lady», by Alma Lopez, a painting of the Virgin Mary with dark skin and indigenous features, wearing roses which cover her breasts and genitals as underwear, constitutes an example of the transformations Chicana artists have undertaken in their representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This particular image contemplated from Lopez's lesbian feminist perspective: as a woman who loves women and

cares for them, led to a major controversy in 2001 at the Santa Fe's International Museum of Folk Art (MOIFA). The defiant look and the loss of the praying attitude in her hands, did not enrage Catholic male representatives as much as the fact that, according to them, she was only wearing «a bikini» (Gaspar de Alba & López 2011, 214). Only her navel was showing; no cleavage, hips or pubic region were exhibited. Just her bare arms and legs were enough to start a persecution against Lopez's piece of art. After the controversy, López and Alicia Gaspar de Alba published the reflections of all the people involved in the process of defending the right to bring this cultural icon down to earth; to transform the Virgin, the mother and nurturing figure, into an emblem of resilience, a symbol of her people's endurance despite oppression and abuse.

It is also through this artistic intervention that we find the example on how the body of a mother can be home «the body can be reclaimed and refigured as home –that desired place of connectedness, family, and well-being– with full realization that the body/home is sometimes the site of exposure to just the opposite: abuse, hunger, polluted water and air» (Chiro, 2010: 199).

Relationships with mothers and grandmothers constitute one of the most relevant themes in the anthology. Some contributors, like Cathy Arellano, express their desire to find women like their mothers so that she can give herself to them, to provide the love and care they never had before. Her poem «Yeah, I Want a Woman like my Mother because I Couldn't Have Her» (Arellano, 1991) describes how the mother of the narrator suffered: crying, drinking gin and smoking after possibly having been abused or even abandoned by her lover. It is not casual that this poem appears included in the section titled «Desire», as the protagonist of Arellano's poem has grown up understanding that romantic love means suffering for the other person to the extent of not being able to take care of your own children. This woman needs to find a female partner to expresses her love for her in a more caring way than her mother did, to compensate for the abandonment she has experienced. Thus, the narrator combines her erotic desire for women with her desire to be important for another woman, not only in terms of romantic partnership but also creating a new family.

It is from mothers and grandmothers that they learn to love another woman, sometimes romantically, but what they do most frequently is taking care of them, as erotic desire is not the only aspect of intimacy they express in their writings. For some of them, the warm embrace of kinship, the enactment of true ecofeminist empathy means more than a sexual affair. As it proves hard for them to live up to the expectations placed on them by their families, most suffer the anxiety of not belonging. Starting from Gloria Anzaldúa, her poem «Old Loyalties» (Trujillo, 1991: 74-75), and some of her writings included in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Anzaldúa, 2009) reflect her anguish when she experiences that the object of her desire does not care for her, nor expresses her love in terms of support. Instead of getting retribution, on the contrary, she pays a high price for her sexual pleasure. A similar situation appears in «Gulf Dreams» by Emma Pérez (1991a), a story of the coming of age of a young adult Chicana who discovers her love for another woman and which I analyze in the next section.

In the same vein, Cherrie Moraga ends «La Ofrenda» paying tribute to the lesbian women who suffer breast cancer taking Tiny, the narrator's classmate and first love in school, as the example. She insists on the fact that they have not given birth, as if nurturing a child would be the condition to get cancer. It is not out of ignorance but trauma and frustration that Dolores, the narrator, expresses herself this way, because she understands cancer as the punishment for their condition and refutes the idea that their bodies are unnatural and toxic: «I thought, what is this shit? Women don't use their bodies as biology mandates and their breasts betray them? » (Moraga, 1991: 8). She ends her reflection with a poem in which she offers herself in sacrifice as the other lesbian women before her: «I inscribe my own name too / Tattooed ink in the odorless / flesh of this page // I, who have only given my breast / to the hungry and grown / the female and starved / the women» (verses 8-15). Lesbian bodies transgress the idea of reproduction for the nation, so writers like Moraga start a vindication of their bodies against being identified as toxic. Many years after the publication of *Chicana Lesbians*, this consideration of toxic is still discussed by Gosine (2010: 156): «The articulation of nature within a white, nationalist framework, furthermore, produces homosexuals and non-whites as not just strange, but toxic».

Gosine explains the concept of moral purity through which gay and lesbian outdoor activities get labelled as trash, as pollutant for the environment, thus the consideration of toxic. Although most of the discussions are related to gay sexual cruising in public parks, he discusses how lesbian recreational spaces have also been targeted as immoral places by the dominant society⁵. Their presence represents a threat to a system of heteronormative values that has been accepted as universal and against which Moraga rebelled in the story already mentioned «La Ofrenda». Dolores, the narrator, reads in the *L.A. Times* about lesbians dying from cancer, how a public concern becomes the evidence about the reproachable behavior their bodies engage in when loving women instead of bearing children. The end of the story explains the reason why Moraga describes the body of Tiny as she does, with detailed descriptions about how strong and beautiful it was and how Dolores made her vibrate when making love to her, touching her where she did not allow anyone to touch. Contemplating her body «sin a stitch» (Moraga, 1991: 6), Dolores finally allows herself to find her looks erotic, her brown body which connects both to their heritage, to the women from whom they were born, their mothers. Smelling Tiny's body which brings cultural reminiscences as she leaves a copal scent, Dolores understands that the woman whom she considered her sister, her family, is offering herself, transforming their sexual act into a ceremony. Far from toxic, Tiny's body represented a temple of resistance to conventions, but a place of return: «un hogar distante/aguardándome» (Moraga, 1991: 6); literally, her intimate parts become a home waiting for the narrator and the rest of women she did not have time to love. The concepts of home and homecoming belong fully to ecofeminist ethics of care and visions of women in relationship with the environment and with one another. Homecoming for the protagonists of the stories in *Chicana Lesbians* means integrating the human and the more than human world

⁵ As an example of how the rights of queer citizens were being constantly violated, it is significant to point out that the US Congress passed a bill in 2021 to prevent it: «To prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity; and to protect the free exercise of religion. Sec.2. Prohibition against discrimination or segregation in places of public accommodation». Congress Bill (2021): Fairness for All Act 117th Congress, 1st session, (online: <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1440/>>, accessed: November 30th, 2023).

of your surroundings in your own bodily essence, partaking into the materiality of other living beings, embracing the action of affective ecologies (Weik von Mossner, 2017: 3).

Moraga (2009) will expand on this idea in her formulation of a Queer Aztlán, insisting on asking for the liberation of the queer body, since according to her, women's bodies and the bodies of those «who transcend their gender roles» have been historically contemplated as territories to be conquered using a very ecofeminist statement: «The nationalism I seek is one that decolonizes the brown and female body as it decolonizes the brown and female earth» (Moraga, 2009: 223). Ana Castillo goes even further adopting a clear decolonizing position in «La Macha» urging Chicana lesbians to «make our principal struggle one towards which we ultimately experience the beauty of our whole selves –an organic unified entity rejoicing in our connection with all living things on earth» (Castillo, 1991: 47).

4. ECOFEMINIST VIEWS ON FAMILY AND HOME

Among the essays, poems and stories of *Chicana Lesbians*, some of the writers express how coming out as lesbians meant facing the rejection of their families, especially in the case of those who had grown up in very conservative backgrounds. For those who weren't questioned by their families, it was the representatives of Chicano patriarchal tradition that made them feel their betrayal to their culture. Their sexual identities became a solid barrier separating them from their Chicano tradition, which deeply rooted in Catholic beliefs, identifies normativity with heterosexuality and deviancy with homosexuality of any kind.

Emma Pérez in «Gulf Dreams» (Pérez, 1991a) the short story she expands into a novel in 1996, expresses her romantic love for a teenager like her, a young woman as she calls her: the sister of her sister's friend and regrets that she cannot openly voice her erotic desire for her. The protagonist dreams of this young woman who has a relationship with a young man and uses it to make our narrator jealous while she pretends caring for her. This is the gulf, the difference in the intention that separates both and creates a distance between them. The metaphor extends to the emotional distance that separates them while the land, the

space portrayed in the narrative, announces a rural landscape with cotton fields. Texan cotton fields and cottonwood trees witness and seal the encounters between the two women. Their first evening together as friends takes place in a park under a cottonwood tree, with nature witnessing the intensity of the narrator's juvenile passion and erotic desire for her friend. The landscape serves her, in a very ecofeminist exercise of liberating herself, while the tree lets its leaves fall free from its branches at the same time, to make her confession to the reader. The grass on which they lie and the tree under which they exchange gossip appear as natural objects of protection associated with the description of the female body of her friend in which she finds home and wishes she could develop her caring and nurturing potential. Not surprisingly, the cottonwood tree is considered sacred by many Native American tribes, a tree that implies transformation, like the one which is taking place in the narrator who falls in love with the young woman under its shade. The next encounter is marked by the dizziness the protagonist feels during the journey while watching fields, rows of plants laden with cotton balls. The next time the narrator talks about cotton it is to introduce the boyfriend of the young woman, how he worked in the fields picking cotton, referring to the hardship of this labor by romanticizing the description of the young man's back. As cotton picking is associated with migrant workers in the Southwest of the US and related to low-income households, Pérez talks about him as «a beautifully strong, muscular, brown back» (Pérez, 1991a: 98), paying somehow an homage to the necessary but forgotten sacrifice of unskilled workers in the fields. While she provides emotional support and caring, he gives physical protection thanks to his strength and sustenance, exactly what it is expected from a husband. Thus, devalued as caretaker, the protagonist feels in clear disadvantage towards this man when she realizes the material and economic support he offers the young woman, supporting the vision traditional societies have of men as breadwinners. Cotton, then, serves Pérez multiple purposes: on the one hand it brings memories of her growing up in South Texas and connects the narrator with the land, offering a feeling of being home but, on the other, it reminds her of the abuse suffered by field workers, both men and women at the same time evoking the pain associated with unrequited love and how her body aches for caring.

Reflecting on how she cannot freely come out of the closet because of her heritage, the narrator in «Gulf Dreams» shares her frustration with the readers about this more than likely journey towards marriage and compulsory motherhood, focusing on the expectations both families have about them:

To link families with four sisters who would be friends longer than their lifetimes, through children who would bond them at baptismal rites: *Comadres*. We would become intimate friends, sharing coffee, gossiping and heartaches. We would endure the female life cycle –adolescence, marriage, menopause, death and even divorce, before or after menopause (Pérez, 1991a: 97).

It is after this description of apparent acceptance of her situation that Emma Pérez breaks the narrative and introduces a revealing single sentence in between paragraphs through which the narrator rebels against her destiny: «but I had not come for that. I had come for her kiss» (Pérez, 1991a: 100). This last sentence states her determination to make the young woman fall in love with her, transform her into home, unresistant to accept that their relationship will remain one of friendships, of *comadrazgo*.

Repeated twice in the narrative, the term *comadre*, in this short story, acquires this idea of forceful motherhood imposed on women; the idea of the societal expectations of marriage and motherhood for all the girls which have already been mentioned. Regarding all this from an ecofeminist perspective, becoming *comadres* in Spanish means literally sharing the duties of taking care of children together, a practice fully belonging to the traditional role of caretaker imposed on women. *Comadre* comes from latin *commater*, *-tris* and it has different meanings in the dictionary of the Real Academia Española⁶: one corresponds to «godmother» and the other stands for a very close female friend, somebody whom you trust more than other friends. In the case of this story, the suffering appears because the protagonist is in love with her *comadre* but she is not corresponded and cannot express it freely without being reprimanded and/or punished for it. The story contemplates *comadrazgo* as a narrow relationship between women based on caring

⁶ Online: <<http://www.rae.es>>, accessed November 28th, 2023.

for one another but supporting heterosexuality as Rueda Esquibel (2009: 119) argues, «these friendships function as a constant prop to the heterosexual structure-maintaining and always giving precedence to heterosexuality or in effect to the male». Anticipating Anzaldúa's new tribalism, this story partakes in the attempt to rebuild relationships of *comadrazgo* as examples of caring for each other against a heterosexual normative compulsory environment. *Comadres* regarded as a lifesaving force also provide support against patriarchal violence and sexual abuse. Thus, the story portrays the transformation of the concept of *comadre* applying ethics of care, creating a tribe of shared spiritual learning. Rueda Esquibel (2009: 91) discusses «Gulf Dreams» and analyzes the implications of this concept of *comadrazgo* in the protagonists of the novel: «In the socially sanctioned system of *comadrazgo*, 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». The narrative anticipates the creation of communities that currently exist of women who support each other intellectually such as the ones Anzaldúa (2009: 297) called «writing comadres», a community of academics helping each other to accomplish work.

The writings under study here constitute their final confrontation with this feeling of shame, guilt, in Martha Barrera's words, as well as a rebellion against heteronormative education. As they still find that the values traditionally centered on *familia* must not be surpassed, these women inherit the need to share love and care, creating alternative families in which they constantly express the idea of being there for each other to provide a nurturing support. Denise Alcalá in her piece «La Frontera» makes a clear statement about her feelings: «I think of other Chicana lesbians as family. We relate, connect, know our strength. The strength we have because of living as who we are» (Trujillo, 1991: 197). Some of the attitudes that appear as examples of caring and supporting each other are weeping together, holding each other or even wiping each other's mouths or eyes when crying. Their grief, contemplated as a constant in most of these writings, finds release and relief within the realm of lesbian love, as they acknowledge finding family and home in their partners, making family from scratch as Moraga calls it in *This Bridge Called my Back*.

The repetition of the need to protect each other from the «common evil» which is patriarchal heteronormative tradition unites their efforts in a truly ecofeminist tendency of finding home in attitudes of empathy and caring. Thus, the idea of home projected in these writings refers to a physical and metaphorical place where to feel protected, an escape from unsafe places such as households where abuse and oppression are the norm. It is also in the land, the natural and cultural territories where they find support; the homeland works as another family as they take comfort in the surroundings they recognize as familiar. The testimony of Terri de la Peña, through her character Monica Tovar in «Beyond El Camino Real» (Peña, 1991), explores her fear of rejection after leaving the well-known territories of her childhood, on her way to meet her partner's family. For de la Peña, travelling beyond El Camino Real, the cross-country trip, means a betrayal to her roots; the space becomes symbolic of her need to connect with her culture and ethnicity more than with her lesbian sisters. In ecofeminist terms, this attachment to the land is the one providing nurturing and comfort for her because her partner doesn't understand her anguish and anxiety connected with the attachment to the Southwest. Monica has used her journal during the trip to express her feelings of alienation and her disappointment in her lover who failed to understand the identity crisis she was suffering. The narrator frames the story at a time Monica is picking up the remnants of her broken relationship with Jozie, evoking the trip she took to New England through pictures and journal entries. Contemplating the pictures after the relationship has ended, the landscape confirms her where she belongs: «her brown skin and her black hair complemented Arizona's ruddy earth tones. Yet in the later Chicago photos, she already seemed out of place, awkwardly seated by Lake Michigan, the blustery winds disheveling her hair; her smile was unnatural, her facial tension evident» (Peña, 1991: 88). In this case, identification comes with the familiar landscape and her Chicana friends, Monica finds home in the Southwest not in her lover's arms, a lover who had neglected her own family and who did not accept her relationship with her culture and traditions.

Similar sentiments may be found in Cantú (2019: 10), particularly in the poem «A Love Poem, Alas» dedicated to Elvia, her life companion. Despite the clear grief the poem describes in the first stanza, Cantú ascertains her feelings towards the love of her life who firmly grounds

her to earth. As Elvia becomes «secure shore to the tumultuous seas», Cantú rejoices in a whole life of memories, of moving from place to place but always returning home, to Texas and to Elvia. The poet celebrates the imbrication of love with the natural elements that surround them, identifying Elvia and the love they profess for each other, with the familiar spaces they inhabit. Thus, in the first stanza, she unites her homeland of Texas with Arizona, Elvia's place of origin and combines both lands making the comparison with a Magritte painting. Like the painter, Cantú attempts to make the reader become aware of their surroundings, sensible to the more-than-human world and aims to modify preconceived images of reality, exercising a truly post-anthropocentric attitude, typical of ecofeminist philosophies. Finding an alternative way to look at the world, the poet knows she must thank Elvia for her homecoming and for finding safety in her, in good and hard times. Understanding each other's needs and requirements, they restructure the traditional concept of *familia*, and create a new place for nurturing and caring. It is through this configuration of post-anthropocentric love that this poem provides the necessary balance to eliminate the guilt and shame that the texts formerly analyzed evidenced.

5. CONCLUSION

As I have indicated in the above discussion of Chicana texts, the authors undergo a transformative return to their origins in the stories, poems and essays under analysis in this study; after a long journey in search of themselves, of their roots as Chicanas and non-heterosexual, they realize that it is their attachment to the land, to the natural environment where they grew up or where they live that they most feel «at home» and must therefore reinforce. The homeland appears first as an ideological construction, the new *familia* of their choice, no longer as a site of resistance against the attack of heteronormativity but as a space where ideas and opinions can be peacefully shared. Such a space provides the family, the embrace their relatives were formerly reluctant to give them. Apart from the construction of a new ideological homeland in agreement with ecofeminist postulates of balancing nature and culture, another of the objectives that seems to have been attained refers to the importance of space, of gaining physical space for themselves,

finding a place to settle, a place to be. The authors of *Chicana Lesbians* were still struggling with their feeling of belonging to a physical and metaphorical place where they felt rejected, as contemplated in Emma Pérez's «Gulf Dreams» and Terri de la Peña's «Beyond El Camino Real». Today, in the second decade of the twenty first century, the Chicana lesbian writers and artists cited here have found the recognition of their work which advances towards a more empathic world, and they express their reconciliation, the end of a healing process, as Cantú evidences in her love poem to Elvia. Cantú returns home, as Ana Castillo, Emma Pérez, Alma López and other Chicana lesbian writers do; these writers who inhabit the contemporary literary space have arrived home after a long journey of battling against forces that were pushing them against nature, against their caring and nurturing for each other and for their homeland. Caring for the land and caring for each other becomes one and the same thing, achieving balance is done through describing love in terms of caring for the environment and in intimate connection with the environment. Finding home may not mean merely to return to the family embrace, but instead homecoming refers to finding shelter in the creation of new family models, in a physical and emotional place where they can feel safe from abuse or criticism as the narrator in «Gulf Dreams» proves. I agree with Rueda Esquibel's (2009: 6) assertion that «The Chicana lesbian characters, and the writers behind them, have chosen to fight, each with her *pluma*, with her pen in her hand, for her place in Chicano/a culture and U.S. history», and I would add that their love *testimonios*, talking openly about desire and caring for each other have also provided them with tools to contribute to the creation of a more empathetic world in terms of post-anthropocentric concerns such as the ones explored in ecofeminist philosophies.

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Imelda MARTÍN-JUNQUERA
 Universidad de León
 imelda.martin@unileon.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8099-1697>