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La Llorona Don't Swim The L.A River: A Trickster's Guide To The Poetics Of The Pit

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LA LLORONA DON'T SWIM THE L.A RIVER:
A TRICKSTER'S GUIDE TO THE POETICS OF THE PIT

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Poetry

by
Rosie Angelica Alonso
June 2015

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River is a collection of poems that explore the issues of growing up in East LA as a young, bilingual Chicana. These poems are an attempt to capture my experiences through story telling by blending Spanish, English, street slang, and the casual spoken diction. The speaker embodies several versions of the trickster figure: linguistic tricksterism, cultural tricksterism, gender tricksterism, and religious tricksterism. She navigates linguistic tricksterism through the code switching of English and Spanish, using Spanglish as her main dialect, and often blending in slang, creating Slanglish. In cultural tricksterism, she focuses on the experiences of the working class, the migrant workers, the bilingual speakers, and the overall generational changes in the Mexican culture. The speaker constantly searches for the meaning of what it is to be a woman and what it means to love through gender tricksterism. She looks to her mother, la Virgen De Guadalupe, and La Llorona to try and understand her complex identity. *La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River* works to form a different type of spirituality through sacred humanism from the point of view of the religious trickster. These poems pose the question: *where else can God be found other than church and the bible?* The speaker seeks God in tattoos, in punk music, in the moshpit, in the city, and in people. She forms a new approach to tradition through the persistence of kind rebellion, her own personal version of love.

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I dedicate this book pa' mi familia, for their love, support, and encouragement. Ustedes me enseñaron que sí se puede. Pa' mi Mamá, for being the strongest, most beautiful person in my life. You taught me love. Pa' mi Papá, for being so hard working and pushing me to do my best. You taught me laughter. Thanks to my brother, sisters, nieces, and nephews: Albert, Moma, Gaby, Adriana, Meli, Carmen, Bear, Santi, Cris, and Marco. To my grandparents: Papá Isaac, Mamá Rosita, Abuelito Chevo, y Mamá Mona. To my pets Ozzy, Baby, Buttons, Jimmy, Baby Hawk, and Rocky. I love you all so much. This family is the reason why I write. Without you all, I'd have no story.

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Thank you to mi querido barrio de Los Angeles, the city I carry tattooed on my skin. To the LA and IE punk-ska scene, for the good times. Pa' mi gente Mexicana y de todo color. Esta historia es pa' ti.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

LA LLORONA DON'T SWIM THE L.A RIVER: A TRICKSTER'S GUIDE TO THE POETICS OF THE PIT

Language as Cockroach: Linguistic Tricksterism

One thing I remember my dad always telling me is to be observant. He said that we see things more intently than other people. The “we,” I had thought, was the me and him, the bond we shared. But as I thought more about it, I realized he meant we poets, we who take more notice in our surroundings. What he meant was political: We, Chicanos, have to be observant and aware because our identity might not be fully acknowledged. We can be misfits even in our own barrio since others can judge and dismiss our cultura, our language, and our place. So as a kid that grew up with Spanish as her first language, spoke broken English, and who lived in a tough part of Los Angeles, I looked for unity and acceptance in an unexplored side of East LA: the backyard punk scene. Every weekend at around 8pm, the sound of screeching guitars echoed from someone’s yard and shook my bedroom window. I did what any twelve-year-old would do: told my parents I was gonna go to a friend’s house to work on “la tarea” but instead, I’d ride my skateboard to the backyard that smelled of weed, booze, and sweaty armpits. The backyard with the group of spinning bodies, falling, kicking, and punching each other in a moshpit. The backyard with the fast

aggressive music that mixed English and Spanish in their songs. The backyard with the music that sounded just like me when I spoke.

Being bilingual is being flexible, being able to adapt to two different cultures, two different languages, and two different ways of expression. Being bilingual in East LA is a vehicle of urbanism; the vehicle to move in and out of the city the way a cockroach does. Being a hybrid Chicana, both an English and Spanish speaker, means being able to adapt and survive her surroundings.

In Sandra Cisneros' novel, *The House on Mango Street*, the main character, Esperanza, struggles with how others perceive her name. It's often mispronounced, making others to make fun of her for it and causing Esperanza to want a new name, one that strays away from her real one and her given identity:

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name- Magdalena- which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do. (Cisneros 10)

Likewise, in my poem “Learning English,” the speaker struggles with her identity as a bilingual speaker. She’s caught in the in-between: her parents want her to speak Spanish in order for her to keep her culture, but because of the expectations of society and the education system, she knows she must learn English in order for her to succeed:

At home my parents only spoke Spanish
Said I’d learn English at school anyway.
Pero no se te olvide el español, Mom would say.
But I’d practice English each night like a prayer,
My hands over my open mouth,
a ritual to repair a broken voice.

Similarly to the theme of language, in my poem “Pero, Cucarachas Have Feelings, Too, You Know,” the speaker forms a bond with the cockroaches in her apartment because like her, they’re smart but misunderstood. Unlike the kids at school who make fun of her broken English, the humorous but serious message in the poem is that cockroaches don’t judge her, so she feels comfortable speaking Spanglish and broken English:

Some days,
I’d come home crying

When kids made fun of me for mispronouncing words in English
Even at a school where most were Latino.
But I'd speak to the cockroaches in my room
As a queen reciting to her guards.

In my manuscript, *La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River*, the speaker finds unity in the punk movement. Punk itself is attitude and rebellion. The danger, surprise, excitement, and rowdiness are what distinguish backyard shows from venue and bar shows. The first punk show I went to was down the street from my house off Whittier Blvd in East Los. I walked in when the pit was at its climax: people shoving each other, bodies falling on top of one another, punches and kicks being thrown in every direction. I wasn't sure what was happening and why it was happening, but it looked inviting because there was a sense of community with every person dancing. In that moment, any shame or embarrassment would go away, everyone would go wild in public, together in a group, and there was absolutely no regret. It was pure chaos, the best kind—completely untamed, animalistic, and human. People that fell were instantly picked up and pushed back in. If someone got hit pretty bad, he or she would get a pat on the back or a high-five once the song was over, a reassurance that there were no hard feelings and a sign of respect for surviving the pit. If a shoe or a piece of clothing went missing, someone would hold it up in the air for the owner to claim. Complete strangers exchanged sweat and blood in the spinning madness, which was like

placing a seal on a newly founded friendship. I ran in to join the crowd only to get elbowed in the face and have my nose broken within seconds in. This would probably be enough to get a twelve-year-old girl to turn the other way, but besides the adrenaline that came with it, I had never felt more welcomed, accepted, and liberated than in a moshpit, so I stayed.

My writing process is similar to the process of the pit in the way that I want to make my poems accessible to everyone; I want everyone to be able to join and feel welcomed. In other words, I don't overwrite phrases in my poems. I leave them gritty and covered in gas puddles and littered in trash because that's how the East LA barrios are in real life. I leave in the stumbles and falls of being in the pit by using words and phrases of conversational speech and leaving in the mind's train of thought. In her memoir, *East L.A Rage To Hollywood Stage A Chicana Punk Story Violence Girl*, Alice Bag, lead singer of East Los legendary punk band The Bags, describes the experience of a punk show:

I'm bouncing on stilettos like a fighter in the ring, I charge out onto the edge of the stage, full of adrenaline and fire. I sing into the faces in the front rows. They are my current, my source of energy. I urge them to engage. I know there's something in them, some inner carbonation lying still, waiting to be shaken. It's fizzing in them as I shake them up. Shake, motherfucker, shake! I want you to explode with me. (Bag 7)

In a similar way, my poem “How to Prepare for an East LA Punk Show,” invites the characters in the poem to engage with each other, but it also invites the reader or audience to join in on the energy throbbing from the words and actions. The surprise of each line is like a good ol’ punch to the face when one is in the pit. The use of “you” and “your” also places the reader/listener in the scene:

The screech from the speakers vibrates up your spine
Making your heart rush against your studded bra
So you pay and run in at the drummer’s count of “1, 2, 3”
Letty links arms with you and you with Mari and you push your way
through the crowd.
Take an elbow to the nose,
a clenched fist under the eye
a steel-toe boot to the rib
a row of knuckles to the lower lip
Which only pumps you up so you slam head first into Letty
And Letty bumps into Mari and Mari crashes
Into Juan and Juan knocks into the crowd
Mixing sweat and blood, a sacred ritual.

The lines in this poem have direct images, but the language stays conversational. The line “Letty links arms with you and you with Mari and you

push your way/ through the crowd” is intentionally confusing because being in the pit is total chaos. If I said that line in real life to someone I was having a conversation with, I’m pretty sure that’s how I would say it because it’s casual; there’s no real punctuation when one speaks.

Sometimes I still get pretty nervous when I read in front of people, but it slowly eases down once I hear the audience responding. I like to connect with my listeners by acknowledging them throughout my reading. I’ll talk to them individually at times because I never want to feel superior to an audience just because I’m the performer in that moment. It’s like being the singer in a backyard show, where the audience and singer are on the same level since there are no stages, so everyone’s equally powerful and everyone’s part of the band.

Moreover, the natural language in my poetry is a theme that’s consistent throughout *La Llorona Don’t Swim The LA River*. I write my poems in the conversational tone, as if the reader and I were at a bar having drinks and talking. The tone is relaxed, casual, and familiar because it uses slang, Spanglish, and the informal. Sherman Alexie, my favorite fiction author, uses the same inviting, conversational technique in his novel *Flight*:

I remember my mother and father slow-dancing to that Blood, Sweat & Tears song. I remember how my father whisper-sang “I Love You More Than You’ll Ever Know” to my mother. I remember how they conceived me that night. Okay, I don’t exactly remember it. I can’t see my mother and

father naked in bed, but I can feel a lightning ball rebound off my soul
whenever I think about it.

I figure my father's sperm and my mother's egg were equal parts
electricity and water.

So, yes, I was created because of that bloody, sweaty, tearful, and
sex-soaked song. And so my mother always sang it to me to celebrate my
creation. (Alexie 3)

He writes in the way one speaks. The use of the phrases "okay," "so, yes" and "I
remember" create casual language and make it accessible and engaging for a
reader. It also makes one trust and like the speaker because of their laid-back
tone.

Alfonso Ortiz's essay, "The Sacred Clown" or "Payaso Sagrado" posits
how the clown is alike to the trickster in the manner that, in my poems, the clown
refuses to speak the "right" English and sticks with interweaving Spanish and
English, using slang, and staying in the casual tone. The clown is creating their
own language, the language of the common people; thus rebelling and making a
political claim that Spanglish and slang are just as equally significant:

The clown's 'sacredness,' like the shaman's, hooks into an extraordinary
initiatory/ visionary experience and rebirth [...] a new, omnipotent mode of
existence [...] the clown is the embodied of his culture's ability to sustain

ambivalence and contradiction.” The clown is “an anti-ritualist presiding over an anti-rite. (Ortiz 271)

The trickster-clown in my poems lets her unconscious unravel her writing process, letting her mind spill out the words, tone, and phrases the only way it knows. It often feels like a messy accident that reveals an unexpected surprise, like that of the coyote sticking his tail in the fire pit and in turn finding where fire was kept or the drowned cucaracha resurrected from the pits of the kitchen sink like cockroach Jesus.

My poem “Recipe for a Tattoo” does similar moves in tone, language, phrases, vivid expressiveness, and casual story telling:

Look for a spot on your skin that you think will do.

Behind the ear for a small crooked rose

that reminds you of your ex novia

Along the jawline for the area code of your hood

to let them homeboys know how firme you really are.

Trace the chosen spot with your fingers to show Mamá

where the name of a new lover will be.

Set the timer for how many times

she shakes her head and calls you a mensa.

[...]

Power your electric needle.

Intensity: bien chingón.

[...]

Preheat any regret to 400 degrees,

Depending on the thickness.

Take a shot of tequila and consider another long-term commitment.

Repeat from step one.

The story telling in the poem reveals a surprise one line at a time. The code switching from English to Spanish is like the back and forth pushing and shoving of the pit. The choice of words like “firme,” “mensa,” and “chingón” refer back to the sacred clown aesthetic of reinventing and reestablishing the common speech. In one line, the speaker is heartbroken and in another she falls in love quick and many times, yet her interest fades just as fast. The pride of where one is from is declared by the tattoo of a city’s area code, which connects to family, culture, and environmental upbringing. The speaker wears the city on her skin like a billboard, and Los Angeles is widely known for their billboards. There’s a strong assertion of the speaker’s sexual identity and reclamation of her body by getting tattooed, whether it be a tattoo of a previous or current girlfriend; it’s a choice that only she can make, even if she may come to regret it later. Regret here suggests how moments, feelings, and emotions are temporary, yet a tattoo is for good. The last line, “Repeat from step one,” suggests that there’s a

continuing cycle of love, pride, sadness, happiness, and pain throughout one's life. The speaker as sacred clown envisions a new way to see her body; she takes a recipe, something that's often generationally passed down from mother to daughter, and twists it by making it a recipe not for food, but for a tattoo.

Trickster as Bordercrosser: Cultural Tricksterism

On my 9th birthday, my dad took me to the Rosemead Swapmeet in South El Monte, twenty minutes outside of East LA and bought me those four-for-a-dollar party poppers that let out a loud bang when they hit the ground. That's all I wanted as a birthday present since it was the closest I could get to firecrackers. Once we got home, I took the poppers out of the box and started firing them on the porch, at my mom's plants, at the trail of ants below the front window, at the wind chimes hanging by hooks, and at the roaches skittering up the ceiling. My dad came outside when he heard the brawl between the cucarachas and me and took the poppers out of my hand. He smirked and swayed his head to the side, signaling me to look inside the living room. My older brother, who was knocked out from a night of partying, slouched across the couch with slobber below his bottom lip and snored louder than a police siren. My dad didn't hesitate to throw a few poppers against the wall next to where my brother napped. Instantly, my brother bolted up, his eyes blurry but wide. "Levántate, cabrón! Didn't I tell you to mop the floor?" dad said to him. "No más andas de huevón." My dad grazed his sideburns with his thumb. Both my brother and I knew this was a sign that dad

would start his version of a lecture, which was in the form of a story, true story or not, but mostly 70% true with lots of exaggeration. “Do you know what your abuela did when I misbehaved and did babosadas?” dad continued. My brother smacked his lips because he had heard this story as much as I had, but still we stood there, listening. “She would grab a belt that had cow fur on it that made you think it was soft, pero no, it was hard and made your skin burn redder than the devil’s nalgas.” My brother rolled his eyes, surely thinking dad was full of shit and he probably was, but I stared at my dad’s hands, the way they moved up and down as he told his lecture-stories, the way he paused to see if we were listening and believing him, which meant us nodding, and the way he would change his stories each time he told them, adding a new twist—him becoming the rebel, the santo, the villain, the hero or all of them and none at the same time. My dad, the payaso trickster, would make our cramped little apartment in East LA our very own theater in the barrio.

The trickster figure is something that I come across in a lot of my poems, whether it’s the tone, the actions of the speaker, the twists and surprises in the lines, the images that keep expanding, or a revelation discovered at the end. In her book, *Celebrating Latino Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Cultural Traditions*, Maria Herrera-Sobek highlights the various aspects of the trickster through different traditions:

The multifaceted characteristics of the animal have also influenced the mythology of the American Southwest where the coyote has come to represent the figure of the “trickster,” as well as a creator, a cultural hero believed to have secured fire and daylight for humans and to have originated the creative arts. In other traditions the coyote is represented as a sacred clown, a fool in humorous tales, as opposed to an ingenious one, often bested by other figures of Native American religion and folklore.

Though the coyote has acted as a standard character of traditional oral tales this figure has emerged as a central figure in poetry. The coyote has been a central motif in works like Joy Harjo’s “Grace.” In addition to Harjo, Native American authors such as Simon Ortiz and Thomas King have also been lauded for their use of coyote imagery as trickster and clown.

(Herrera-Sobek 376)

The coyote and sacred clown are prominent trickster figures in Native and indigenous folklore, but what I learned to love about growing up in an East LA neighborhood is how the cucarachas, whether one likes it or not, become part of the comunidad. During family dinners, they’ll skitter across the floor to get first dibs on crumbs, in the kitchen they’ll nest behind the fridge, and on the street they’ll take over sidewalks, especially ones near a sewer. To get rid of them is tough work that not even a shoe can squash them to a complete death. If someone tries to drown one in the sink, there’s a big chance that cockroach will

pop back up the next day while you're washing dishes, take it from experience. The cucaracha is the trickster of East LA and the bordercrosser of the urban city. They are similar to the working class people in the way that cockroaches struggle to survive in a city that's so expansive. The working class, many who are Spanish speakers, learn to code switch from English to Spanish to reaffirm their Mexican-American heritage. The fact that we continue to celebrate our culture once we've come to America affirms that we don't forget our identity as we adapt to Anglo society. My poems can act like borders between Mexico and America because the speaker goes back and forth between code switching, slang, tone, and themes.

My poem "How To Befriend Cockroaches" comments on immigration, a heavy social issue in America, especially in California and the Border States. The cockroaches are parodied as migrant workers, the working class who struggle to survive crossing the border for opportunity. The speaker actively tries to stick up for them, protecting them from *la migra*, reading them their Miranda rights, recruiting them into her group of friends, and welcoming them her into her own family. The poem makes the political stance that we need and should welcome and respect everyone equally:

Make a discreet space between your sofa
So when someone sprays *Raid* and they scatter to your room
You can guide them in shouting, "Aquí, cabrones!"

Read them their rights:

You have the right to invade the cabinets and break into my favorite cereal

You have the right to skim across our feet and scare

The shit out of my mom while she watches her Telenovelas

You have the right to procreate in my underwear drawer

You have the right to land in my dad's morning coffee as he takes a sip.

Show them around your hood.

Recruit them into your gang.

Assign nicknames to each:

Sleepy Crawler,

La Cuca Loca,

Oscar De La Roacha,

Saint Roachingberg.

[...]

Print a legal document welcoming them into your home:

I hereby declare thee, cucarachas, of the United States of Familia

And to the Republic of these barrios

On which you stand,

ALL nations

Under God,

Your language, cultura, and children,

Labor, corazón, y alma,

May it come with libertad

And justice for all.

The speaker humanizes the cockroaches and stands between the “border” of justice and injustice as she has the choice to either reject them or welcome them into her home, which is ultimately a symbol for America. The name of the bugspray, *Raid*, is associated with la migra or ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement). The migra is notorious for raiding work places where migrant workers get jobs. The choice of words like “invade,” “procreate,” and “land” play against the remarks that those opposed to immigration might have: immigrants “invade” America, taking away jobs, have families here, and take over the country. Of course, these arguments have no value. The line “*you have the right to land*” argues that yes, all people have a right to live, have families, jobs, education, and equal opportunity in this country. The bordercrosser as trickster is also presented in the next line as the speaker recruits the cockroaches into her gang. There is a generational bordercrossing that occurs in the way that “gang” here isn’t associated with actual gang culture, but is used as a way to describe one’s posse, crew, or group of friends; it becomes a generational jump to the word’s meaning. The phrase “*United States of Familia*” is how the speaker envisions the United States of America: a place where we’re all equal, all respected, and all welcomed. It’s also the way migrant workers see America, a place where their families will have an opportunity to succeed. The end of the

poem plays with the meaning of the Pledge of Allegiance as the speaker constructs her own pledge that stands for what she believes in—liberty and justice for *all* people.

Punk music has inspired a good portion of my writing themes. What I appreciate about most East LA and LA punk bands is how they keep themselves rooted in their culture, either by singing their lyrics in Spanish/Spanglish, weaving in cumbia, norteña, and ranchera rhythms into their songs, singing about social issues prominent to Latinos, and playing shows in places that are easily accessible to the working class (backyards, garages, vacant parking lots, alleys, etc). Hosting shows in these places means that although we might not have a lot, we make the best with what we have. This aggressive but danceable punk genre can be termed as Latino punk-ska, which has become a celebration of our identity. These musical aspects are like that of the bordercrosser trickster who meshes cultures and generational differences together by maintaining tradition and making a new one at the same time. Los Angeles punk ska band, La Resistencia, sing about immigration, labor, living on minimum wage, living in barrios, and other struggles of the working class. Their song “Resiste” is about adapting, surviving, and being proud of one’s culture and identity:

Y cuando salgas a la calle,

Resiste!

Con la voz en alto,

Siempre!

La música como arma

Llévalo en tu alma

Sobrevive

Vive

Resiste!

The lyrics are chant-like, provoking a unity between singer and audience. The singer becomes like a priest, exchanging energy between him and his listener(s).

The inspiration from this song made me write my poem “Red and Blue Flashes Remind Us We’re in America,” which is about the struggles of surviving in America as a Chicana/o:

On Beverly Blvd Gloria is barefoot yelling,
“I DON’T WANT TO SELL ORANGES TO WHITE PEOPLE!”
So, instead, she deals coke and wipes hamburger grease
Off her chin ‘cos it’s better than slamming masa, you see
The cop cars cruise between 6th and Olympic
Memo pisses on graffiti walls
Our spines bend like smoke from broken light bulbs
Mamá scrubs mildew off bathroom stalls
Papá is still nowhere

His dusty trail wagging back
In the direction he came from.

Each character is trying to make a living, but the hardships make it difficult so some have to resort to alternative ways to survive. The hamburger is juxtaposed with “masa,” which is culturally used for tortillas and tamales, both traditional Mexican foods. This line comments on the rejection of culture in order to fit in. The last three lines indicate that the father figure has come to America to look for work but his family hasn’t heard back of his travels, which could be because he abandoned his family, was detained, didn’t make it over, or was killed.

Similarly, Juan Delgado’s poem “Diapers” recounts individuals being victimized by Immigration Customs Enforcement:

1. Raid

Ernesto’s boot heels are wild hooves
Being roped in, left bound in the air.
Carmen, slow-footed, nauseous with child,
Fights them off by swinging her purse.
Pinche cabrones saben hablar español
Cuando no van a arrestar,” she says
As her voice is drowned out by a row
Of washing machines on their rinse cycle.

Like a cat spooked out of a trash bin,

Sal runs into the street.

Chorus: ¡Chingando!

The phrase “¡Chingando!” brings that same chant-like quality that many punk bands have in their music, where the speaker/reader and singer/audience feel a sense of unity, bond, and connection.

The moment I knew I was writing meaningful poems was when I started writing in the language I grew up hearing. Mi abuelo, Papá Isaac, loved to go to a quiet park and watch me play as he smoked a cigarette or played his guitar. He'd choose a bench under a shady tree and began his story. “sabes, chamaca,” he'd say, “te voy a contar una historia que la neta te va gustar un chingo” (You know, little girl, I'm gonna tell you a story and truth is you'll like a fucking bunch). My grandpa and cousins in Mexico carried a street slang when they spoke that made them distinct from other people. My parents and family in East LA have their own Spanglish dialect that I've learned and that I've never forgotten.

In my poem, “El Humo de su Cigarro es El Humo Del Sol,” the speaker wets the bed and is afraid her abuelo will be mad, but instead, he identifies the wet sheets being like the hardships of life:

The night I had a fever

I peed in my sheets

As I dreamt of setting firecrackers along freeway ramps.

I tried scrubbing the stain off the blanket

Before anyone would see it

But abuelo didn't yell

He grabbed it with bare hands

Rolled it inside a bucket with vinegar

Said, *a blanket wet with piss, mija, es como la chinga de la vida*

Her abuelo's casual take on "*chinga de la vida*" stays with the speaker until her adult years because the essence of the tone and meaning is as real as it gets.

She learns the language and dichos she hears from her Mexican grandfather and brings it back to Los Angeles, making her bordercross cultures and celebrate them at the same time.

This casual language one speaks is the natural expression that Ishmael Reed writes about in his essay, "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto/ The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic." To Reed, Neo-HooDoo is a "Lost American Church' updated [...] the Funky Chicken, the popcorn, the Boogaloo and the dance of great American choreographer Buddy Bradley [...] Neo-HooDoos would rather 'shake that thing' than be stiff and erect [...] Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist is a priest. You can bring your own ideas to Neo-HooDoo" (Reed 418). I think of this as bringing my natural language and cultural aspects like myths and dichos into my writing. I bring the streets into the poems—the speech,

the movements, the little utterances one does when saying a specific word or phrase. Slanglish, the blending of Spanglish with slang, is active and distinct from other dialects. It's a language that Mexican-Americans and Latinos adapted by meshing two cultures into one and birthing a new way of speaking.

Langston Hughes' poetry has a huge impact on my style of writing because of his refusal to adapt the formal use of speech, the American Standard English. In his poem "The Weary Blues," for instance, the speaker says:

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin
And put ma troubles on the shelf (Hughes).

The way he spells those last few lines is a political statement that asserts that the way the speaker is talking *is* the right way; there is no correction or argument because it's the natural way one speaks. In my poems, I write in the way of conversation; I purposely leave in the "you know," "sí pero," "la neta," "porque why not" because it's the way the mind processes thought and language naturally.

It's not always the actual language or the way one speaks that creates a form of expression; many times it's in the movement of the body—the way one stands, leans, nods, walks, uses their hands, etc. In his essay, “Song/Poetry and Language- Expression and Perception” Simon J. Ortiz recounts watching his father tell a story through the art of wood carving:

My father carves, dancers usually. What he does is find the motion of Deer, Buffalo, Eagle dancing in the form and substance of wood [...] his sinewed hands touch the wood very surely and carefully, searching and knowing [...] his movements are very deliberate. He knows exactly how it is at that point in a Buffalo Dance Song, the motion of elbow, arm, body and mind. (Ortiz 399-400)

The way we express ourselves isn't just in words but in the energy, feeling, motion, and movement of our bodies. Sometimes words don't do enough when we speak, so communicating with body movements can go a long way. In East LA for instance, one could say “órale, carnal” “¿qué tal?” or “¿qué onda?” for a casual hello, but a simple head nod can express all these things without saying a single word. From my collection *La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River*, in my poem “Los Angeles,” a homeboy character is introduced by his dialect and body movements:

Homeboy calls me over
as he leans against the car door
A smirk glows under his dark shades
Aquí está, the main order of the week
He reaches into his pocket for a zip-lock bag
He's got my mom's stash
Not of what you're thinking
But a stash of mean chiles verdes
Straight from this vato's yard

There could've been other ways to capture the homeboy's character by giving him more dialogue, but the movements of him leaning against his car and smiling under his sunglasses gives a vivid image to the mind and creates mystery. Is the vato just straight up chillin', is he up to no good, or is he trying to flirt with the speaker by seductively leaning against his car door East LA style? The lines "He's got my mom's stash/ Not of what you're thinking" humorously play with expectation and literally call the reader out by breaking the stereotype of a "cholo" by making him not a typical drug dealer but just a common individual who's trying to help the barrio because it's the only way we can we can grow and look after each other. Like many other poems in my manuscript, this poem asserts that the languages and dialects we hear are shaped by our environment and cultural upbringing. Here, Spanglish is the bordercross language of Mexico

and America. It's the language the speaker and characters maintain in order to celebrate both cultures.

The Mother Llorona: Gender Tricksterism

In Sandra M. Gilbert's essay, "My Name Is Darkness," she describes how women have two selves, the private self and public self. The public self is the woman at school, at home, and at work that follows order and that's often criticized. The private self or second self is the woman who's liberated and even if criticized, it doesn't stop her from living unapologetically. Gilbert claims that as women we each carry these two selves:

The woman poet inevitably postulates that perhaps she has not one but two (or more) selves, making her task of self-definition bewilderingly complex [...] the female poet's second self is associated with her secret name, her creative passions, her anxiety, and- yes- her art. And it is this *Doppelgänger* of a second self, which, generating the woman's uneasiness with male myths of femininity, gives energy as well as complexity to her struggle toward self-definition. (Gilbert 125)

A major theme throughout *La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River* is the speaker seeking this second self. The speaker is often trying to discover what type of woman she wants to be: Her loving traditional mother, who's often critical and

disapproving of the speaker's actions, La Virgen Guadalupe, the holy woman of the indigenous people, a Catholic figure who's highly worshipped in Mexico and in Chicana/o culture and one the speaker respects, or La Llorona, the mythic bad woman who fell in love with an Anglo-man, someone outside her racial group and outside the norm, and in turn drowned herself and her children out of passion and anguish. Throughout my poems, the mother and La Virgen represent the public self and La Llorona represents the private self. La Llorona is the anti-woman who breaks tradition but maintains it at the same time; she's the rebel who's liberated sexually, passionately, and creatively. Roberto Cintli Rodríguez's book *Our Sacred Maíz Is Our Mother Indigeneity And Belonging In The Americas* states how some villagers in Mexico say that La Llorona was a "good woman" and that it was really the Anglo man that banished her and her children from the city. She was victimized and innocent (184).

I don't buy it. La Llorona is widely recognized as bad and she's better off that way. Growing up, the stories of her have always cast her as evil in order to get kids to behave and listen to their parents. "If you stay out too late, she will come looking for you" or "If you don't listen, I will tell La Llorona to come take you away, *vas aver*." These were things said to my siblings and me to keep us from being troublemakers. Fear is power, and I like to think of her as the baddest badass of them all.

In my poem, “Myths Del Barrio” the speaker searches for La Llorona because she feels connected to her. She still doesn’t know what’s causing this attraction, but from an early age she becomes fascinated by her:

At night I’d sneak out
Find anything of hers she left behind
Her white gown waving on a tree like a flag.
They say she found love in a bad place.
I wondered if she ever looked for me, a lost daughter.
While my parents were tuned-in to Vin Scully
And the Dodgers hit a homer, I’d slip out the door
To blend with the cheering crowd.
But mom always caught me.

The figures of the mother and La Llorona both have a place in the speaker’s life. The speaker tries to find liberation that the Llorona embodies, even considering herself her daughter, and tries to break away from the ties her traditional, biological mother carries. The cheering crowd from the Dodger game on TV provides a distraction, but it’s also indicating how even though the speaker wants to break from tradition, she is also maintaining her culture—The LA-ness, the Mexican-ness that comes with being a Dodger fan and living in a largely Latino

city. In this poem the speaker hasn't quite achieved liberation, but she's actively exploring for it:

I'd hide under blankets,
Praying to La Virgencita to turn the lights back on
To cover my body in her green silken robe.
I'd pray that it was just the wind
But it's never just the wind.
At the pool I was scared
To jump from the diving board.
[...]
I backed away from the diving board,
But then dad would shout,
No tengas miedo. Órale! Jump!
I closed my eyes, standing closer to the edge,
Closed my eyes and repeated to myself:
La Llorona don't swim the L.A River
La Llorana don't swim the L.A River

The speaker's complexity comes in when she's aware that she might find the Llorona and doesn't necessarily want it but does at the same time. She turns to La Virgen Guadalupe for protection, indicating that the speaker also embodies

the “saint” or “holy woman” in herself; she’s all parts mother, Virgen, and Llorona. She embraces culture and reinvents herself simultaneously. Like Gilbert’s claim, the speaker embraces her many selves. The figure of the father acts as an encouragement for the speaker to find herself, even if he’s not really aware of what he’s doing. The last two lines make a type of accidental invocation, which the speaker doesn’t realize yet until she purposely wants to call upon La Llorona in “How To Invoke La Llorona,” a later poem in the manuscript.

My mom is a natural storyteller, too. Unlike my dad who’s quiet and less social until asked to tell stories or jokes that’ll get him talking, my mom is a social mariposa who befriends anyone she meets and can talk for a whole plane ride from LA to Jalisco, Mexico—that’s four full hours. But this isn’t a bad thing. My mom is so well liked that most, if not all the time, my friends tend to like her more than me. My gang of carnales, often punk guys with patched up leather jackets and tattooed girls rocking the semi-chola look, walk into my house and my mom with no hesitation, hugs them instantly, feeds them, and makes sure they feel welcomed in our home. Then she’ll sit down and ask what their favorite food is. “I’ll make it for you next time you come over,” she’ll tell them. And with that, a new friendship is sealed.

Once my friend Natalie came to visit me from San Francisco. As she and my mom started to bond, Natalie, with a mouthful of mom’s freshly made chilaquiles asked, “How did you and your husband meet?” I smiled because this was a story that I loved hearing my mom tell. My mom grazed over the mole on

her left arm as she began: “Pues, I met him when I was sixteen and he was eleven years older than me.” Natalie’s eyes lit up and her mouth slightly parted. “He was older pero in those days, that wasn’t a big deal.” “Plus,” she added, “he had a motorcycle and his hair combed back like Elvis Presley.” She pointed to a photo hanging above the TV of my dad in his greaser days. “Shit, I want a motorcycle now,” Natalie said, jolting from her seat. My mom’s eyebrows arched up. “It was a great time, I loved it, pero he got in a bad wreck when he was riding in the rain. His motorcycle got smashed beneath a bus.” My mom looked at both of us. “That’s why you should be careful, chamacas. Motorcycles are dangerous. You could crash and break your neck or your cabeza so entonces es mejor que no.”

One morning when I was 20 I woke up with a black eye from getting punched in the face during the pit from a Chenchu Berrinches show, a punk ska band from LA. My left eye was swollen red and black, so I needed to cover it with foundation before my mom freaked out. I quietly skipped towards the bathroom, but before I walked in my mom popped out from the hallway, and though half my vision was blurred, we made straight eye contact. “¿Ahora qué pasó?” she said. “¿Pero quién chingados te manda, eh? Ay muchacha, pero bien te gusta la mala vida, verdad” (Now what happened? But who fucking orders you, huh? Girl, but how you like the bad life, right). This was mom’s response every time I’d come home with a new bruise, a common thing since I was twelve, her response of meshed dichos of disapproval. “Here, let me boil some coconut oil.” She said. “It

will heal that bruise quicker than anything you buy from the store. Your Papá Isaac always used it when he got blisters on his hands.” She’d break a coconut open, cut the white pieces from inside and throw them into a pot of water ‘til melted. This was mom’s routine, always taking care of me with herbal medicine she learned from my abuela. As I sat in the kitchen waiting for mom to heal me, my dad, who was attentive when I’d get hurt only when he felt it was necessary, looked at me, shook his head and just said, “Por pendeja” (that’s what you get for being a dumbass).

With mom, I’d run to her when I needed to be babied and nurtured. With dad, I’d run to him when I wanted to go out when mom wouldn’t let me or when I wanted something in general. He was easy because he wouldn’t be paying attention anyway or he’d say things so jokingly that it was hard to take his lectures seriously. But mom, no one wanted to mess with mom. I’m sure dad was even scared of her. My mom, the mythic storyteller, the voice of reason, and the backbone of the family always had a moral to her stories to try to keep me y a todos in check.

Joy Harjo, a poet I deeply admire, has a poem titled “I Give It Back: A Poem To Get Rid of Fear.” The speaker seeks for a way to free herself, her body, and her mind from any fear she holds. The oral quality and chant-like tone creates an evoking harmony that draws strength from the poem. It acts as a remedy for the speaker’s second self to take over, heal, and liberate:

I take myself back, fear
You are not my shadow any longer.
I won't hold you in my hands,
in my eyes, my ears, my voice, my belly
or in my heart, my heart, my heart, my heart, my heart...
Come here, fear,
I am alive!
and you are so afraid
of dying.

The speaker defeats the fear that her public self portrayed and has fully accepted her second self. Perhaps, the speaker has become that fear; the powerful force that she was once afraid of. Or she has outranked fear in the sense that now it's the fear that is scared of her. The power hierarchy has flipped and the speaker's now in full force of the woman she's become.

In my poem, "How To Invoke La Llorona," the speaker purposely summons and embodies La Llorona because it's the way she can fully embrace her second self:

Follow her steps through the Sixth Street Bridge
Drown your old clothes
Apply violet lipstick,

a spiked denim vest.

Hail Llorona, la homegirl más firme,

Who walks amongst these callejones

searching for sus hijas,

las hijas de la chingada

como yo.

Here are my eyes,

mi alma,

y mi corazón

Here is my skin,

my hands,

y cabello negro

Swallow her reflection from gas puddles,

a shadow bent above the city,

a halo of smoke

Hail Llorona, full of rebeldía,

Deliver me into temptation

And keep me there

The speaker's act of drowning her old clothes suggests a type of death to her old self, her public self. The new self, the second self, blossoms from a spiked denim vest and the application of purple lipstick. The "halo of smoke" places La Llorona

as a complex deity, one holy but fearful. The prayer in the poem similarly creates an oral chant quality like Harjo's poem, building on the power of oral tradition. The reinvention of the Hail Mary prayer indicates the speaker's own sacredness of her own body, a choice to side with La Llorona, the mythic bad woman who's actually the most human, as she gives in to temptation that we as human beings all experience. This temptation is the speaker's longing to break from what it means to be a traditional woman like her mother and the Catholic Virgencita and renaming a part of herself by giving in to her human desires of sex and love, which are out of the heterosexual, Machismo norm of her Mexican culture.

Furthermore, the theme of love in my manuscript is expansive from familial, cultural, residential, and romantic love. The romantic love poems often refer to the body and the idea of love as a sacred union like in Sandra Cisneros' poem, "Your Name Is Mine":

And holy to me And your spirit
And that twin of divine
Death granted me in my sex
A complete breath And this silence
I trust And howl This body this
Spirit you give me
A gift of Taxco rain
Fine as silver

An antique pleasure
Obsidian and jade
The centuries I knew you
Even before I knew your man
Sex mother me The elegance
Of your jaguar mouth

Having words like “holy,” “spirit,” “divine” in the same text as “sex,” “mouth,” and “howl” blend the sacred and profane. The speaker places her body and her lover’s body as the sanctified union that all love is. It also places the woman speaker as the god in control of her sex drive, having the ultimate power to love freely, wildly, and passionately.

My poem “LUVU4LYF,” pronounced “Love You For Life,” is similar to Cisneros’ poem in the way that it celebrates the body:

That day in my room you kissed me
I was so paranoid that my cat
Was spying on us through the window
But you pulled me closer
Looked at me
Like I was a building on fire
I unbuttoned your shirt

Scribbled a tiny hickey onto your neck

You said,

Give me what other girls showed you

Give me what you never knew

[...]

On the roof I blew cigarette ash from your lashes

Before we jumped down as idiots drunk

I said,

Read me like a bible

The speaker breaks from the heteronormative and explores natural love, which doesn't have a set of rules or order. Besides the humor in the line about the speaker's nosy cat, the tone is unapologetic and free from shame. The lines, "*give me what other girls showed you/ give me what you never knew*" show the speaker's romantic attraction to women and how she celebrates that love.

Constant themes in *La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River* are smoke, gas, the sun, and fire. Mythically, the sun is the god of power. In this poem, the images of the "cigarette" and the "building of fire" symbolically represent the speaker's complete power over her own identity. The last line, "*Read me like a bible*" refers back to the paradox of the sacred and profane, equating the body as a sacred text that is worshipped and holy. To the speaker, all sex, all bodies, and all love are a celebration.

The Sacred Humanist: Religious Tricksterism

When I started dressing “punk,” it happened poco a poco. First came the Misfits shirts then the doc martens then the dyed purple hair and then the knee torn jeans that were already in my closet because I’d fall off my skateboard or bike everyday, so I’d rip my clothes DIY style. In 9th grade my cousin Mari shaved the side of her head, so thinking it was the coolest thing ever I said, porque why not, and told her to do the same to me. That was the beginning of the infamous mohawk that had me wake up two hours before school, prepare some lemon juice and Windex into a bowl and apply it to my hair to make it stick up. My hair smelled so lemony that people called me “Pin-Sol girl” as I walked down the halls of Garfield High in East Los. But I took that as a compliment. When I got back home with my new hairstyle, the first thing mom said was “Es por esa música del Diablo que escuchas” (it’s because of that devil music you listen to). And dad’s response was “Te ves como un pinche nopal” (you look like a fucking cactus plant).

That night my parents left to church and I left to a backyard punk show down Simmons Avenue with some of my cousins. It’s not the fashion that’s necessarily important to the punk genre or even relevant. It’s the experience of listening to punk music, either played live or from the stereo that’s always been like a religious trip for me; each song leaves me feeling euphoric and inspired. It’s the tempo of the music and the lyrics that get me jumping up and down, chanting along, and swaying my head back and forth. The live shows are that

much better because the pit is like a Dionysian ceremony of punk rock—the bodies smashing against each other, the sweat and blood exchanged, the joints and liquor passed around, and the love and encouragement one gets like hugging and high-fiving after songs that form new friendships and/or romantic relationships. The pit is the ultimate ritual of madness. It's the closest I get to spirituality; it's the closest I get to God.

In the opening poem of *La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River* titled "East LA Stories," the paradox of the sacred and profane emerge with the juxtaposition of weed smoke and the vision of holy saints in food:

Omar lights another joint and passes it to me

A cloud of pot smoke puffs in sunlight

We hear abuela's voice, a wave of pearls,

Surge the creaking kitchen floor.

Dale gracias a Dios for the good and let him take care of the bad,

she says.

You're good kids, mija, besides all the fregaderas you kids pull

[...]

It makes me think of the time abuela called me

To say she saw the Virgin Mary's tit

Or whatever,

poking out of her tortilla.

She saved it for two weeks
Never realizing what she believed was holy
Was really over-baked and partly burnt.
Abuela rolls the last of the masa
Giving us each a plate
Hoping we learn about miracles and angels
The good of praying to La Virgen De Guadalupe
Even if that piece of heaven ends up in our bread.

The speaker finds the sacred in the weed smoke that puffs in the sunlight coming through the apartment window, but it also gives the reader a sense of place, the LA-ness of the city—the smoke from car exhausts, the factories, the steam from street vendors’ push carts, from backyard barbecues, and the overall SoCal vibe of the sunset and marijuana. The grandmother finds the sacred anywhere she can, even in the tortillas she cooks for the family. The probability of finding saints in food is how deep her faith goes. She seeks the sacred in Catholic deities, but it’s also beyond that because she isn’t only seeking them in the bible or at church; they can be anywhere in the world and that’s what makes her sacredness humanly real.

Similarly in my poem “At Church,” from the cluster poems “Shit My Parents Said” in *La Llorona Don’t Swim The LA River*, the speaker searches for the divine not in the bible but in her family, specifically her dad:

That's when I'd feel mom watching from the corner of her eye

I'd slowly turn my head, scared that her glare itself

Could whip me like dad's leather belt.

She'd have esa mirada that said:

Siguele. Vas aver, just wait 'til we get out of church!

I quickly opened a bible and read wherever it landed:

Thou shalt not ... thou shalt not ... what the hell does 'thou' mean?

I'd look up at Dad so he'd explain.

No estés chingando! Pay attention! He'd say,

Cracking sunflower seeds between his teeth

The Dodger scores open on his lap like scripture.

The idea of asking her dad what “*thou*” means is really asking him what “you” means. It’s asking him, “what are you, dad? Who are you?” and of course, his response is that he isn’t even sure. It’s the process of self-discovery that the speaker admires about her dad. It’s the quality of the religious trickster—finding the holy in oneself. When the father looks for the sacred in the Dodger scores, it seeks the devotional in a game like baseball, one that’s so family-oriented and involves the community. Every person wearing a Dodgers jersey has a commonality, and every person cheering at the game brings a unity of voice and

harmony. It's seeking religion outside religion; finding it in the city, finding it in people.

Last fall, I started volunteering at Tia Chucha's bookstore in Sylmar, which is run by Luis Rodriguez, poet laureate of Los Angeles. The bookstore organizes big events, bringing spoken words artists, Aztec dancers, musicians, poets, community activists, painters, art vendors, and food vendors together to celebrate literature and have a place where kids and their families can enjoy their community. These events are held in Sylmar or Pacoima, cities in North Los Angeles that don't have many artistic outlets such as bookstores. The first time I walked into Tia Chucha's I instantly felt loved and welcomed that I knew volunteering there would be life changing, and it has been. I've met great people and so many great poets and artists that have inspired my writing and goals in life. Luis Rodriguez is someone I've come to respect and admire, and the fact that he's also from East LA makes it that much more inspirational. In his poem "The Concrete River," the speaker similarly experiences God in a different form:

Homeboys. Worshipping God-fumes
Out of spray cans.
Our backs press up against
A corrugated steel fence
Along the dried banks
Of a concrete river.

Spray-painted outpourings

On walls offer a chaos

Of color for the eyes.

The speaker and his homeboys get high off spray paint and see visions in the fumes and trip out on the graffiti on the walls. This addresses how a city can be worshipped as a god. Los Angeles is a god-like city because of its immense size, the amounts of people that live there, the media and entertainment attention it gets, its freeways connecting to other parts of the country, having well-known sports teams, and being an all around industrial city. LA is a city where we come to create and it often shapes us as individuals. Los Angeles is often described as “The Sun City,” which can mythically be represented as the “God City” of California. In Rodriguez’s poem, the graffiti on the walls also implies how art can be sacred. Graffiti is often dismissed as art, but here, it’s described as “a chaos/ of color for the eyes.” It’s perplexingly beautiful.

My poem “Atlantic Blvd ‘98” explores the theme of sacredness through the experience of being in a gang, a lifestyle that the speaker’s brother had been involved in. Individuals that join gangs are often searching for a place to belong, a place where they can feel respected and idolized as a god of their street or city. In “Atlantic Blvd ‘98” the character of the brother turns to drugs and gasoline fumes to feel at a higher state of consciousness in a similar way Rodriguez’s speaker does:

My brother dealt coke,
Broke into cars to smell
The richness of gasoline
Mom would plead
A braided vein stitched in her womb.
We left East Los so he
Would break from those homeboys
That knifed his skull so deep
Left him in a coma for days.
I watched his heart monitor,
the lines rising like buildings
Collapsing by earthquakes.
His scar, a match-lit prayer
Still flickers on his scalp.

This collection of poems urgently searches for an understanding of God in uncommon places. These poems ask: *Where else can God be found other than church and the bible?* The speaker seeks God in tattoos, in punk music, in the moshpit, in the city, in the body, and in people. To her, God *is* the holy and sacred in everything she loves. In *La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River*, the speaker explores four versions of the trickster as she attempts to find new ways

to define love through the act of kind rebellion. La Llorona is a mythical rebel who most people associate with destruction. However, the speaker doesn't want to destroy but do the opposite of creating stories that bring people together—ones that share a common love, respect, unity, and equality toward one another. She creates the "United States of Familia," her own domain, where we're all welcomed and part of one family. In this collection, many poems are in the casual spoken diction because it's the language of the speaker's upbringing and the language of the common people. The speaker breaks from heteronormative expectations since it's infinitely human to love whomever one desires and celebrate that love. She defines the new generation Chicana in her way of exploring language, culture, gender, religion and rebelling but maintaining tradition and love for her culture and heritage. *La Llorona Don't Swim The LA River* has given me an understanding of life, teaching me the gift of story telling and oral tradition. It's the gift I learned through my parents, my family, the city, the barrio, and the people. This story is a story of all of us.

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APPENDIX

LA LLORONA DON'T SWIM THE L.A RIVER