

LITERATURE GUIDE

READ • LISTEN • TELL



“Never Marry a Mexican” by Sandra Cisneros

Literature guide created by
Mélissa Richard

"Never Marry a Mexican" by Sandra Cisneros

Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island (pp. 288-300)

STORY SUMMARY (adapted from the headnotes in *Read, Listen, Tell*)

In "Never Marry a Mexican," the main character Clemencia, determined not to subject herself to the restrictive roles of mother or wife, forgoes her mother's advice to "never marry a Mexican." She chooses, instead, to never marry at all. Clemencia is haunted by several people in her life: her mother, whom she will not forgive for remarrying after her father's death; her father, who died in agony, alone in his hospital room; and Drew, an older white man who taught an art class she took years ago. At the time, Clemencia had an affair with Drew.

Later, she began to sleep with Drew's son, a young man in his twenties. She recalls how Drew would call her "[his] Mallinalli, Malinche, [his] courtesan" (293), as if to meld her identity with the historical Aztec figure, Malinche, a woman whose role in history is often interpreted in popular discourse as a traitor to her people. Simultaneously, Drew would affix his identity to Cortez, the conquistador who claimed Mexico as a colony for Spain.

Clemencia, who describes herself as "amphibious," or "a person who doesn't belong to any class," affirms both her own and Malinche's choices while asking the reader to reflect on the repercussions of this self-affirmation through to the present day.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR (adapted from the headnotes in *Read, Listen, Tell*)

Sandra Cisneros is a Chicana writer from Chicago, born in 1954 to a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. She was her parents' only daughter out of seven siblings. Growing up, she would often spend long periods in Mexico City with her family.

In the 1980s, Cisneros became one of the first Chicana writers to publish their work, alongside others such as Ana Castillo and Gloria Anzaldúa. She frequently centres her stories on Chicana/o characters with a complex heritage, typically involving several cultures, as well as languages. Her best known work is *A House on Mango Street* (1984), which was awarded the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985. She has also received a Lannan Foundation Literary Award for her collection, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), which includes the story this guide is concerned with.

PAIRED READING

This guide will focus on Cisneros’s “Never Marry a Mexican” in conjunction with Laura Paz’s article, “‘Nobody’s Mother and Nobody’s Wife’: Reconstructing Archetypes and Sexuality in Sandra Cisneros’ ‘Never Marry a Mexican.’” It is recommended that Cisneros’s story be read first, followed by Paz’s article, and that Cisneros’s story is then revisited a second time.

Study Expansion

This guide can be paired with the complementary guide for Gloria Anzaldúa’s “Ghost Trap.” Anzaldúa’s story addresses similar themes and issues within a comparable cultural context as Cisneros. The Anzaldúa guide also features a discussion of code-switching, which will be useful in highlighting the relationship between language and culture. In turn, this guide’s focus on the inextricable ties between gender socialization and culture will help to illuminate the complexities and significance of the marital relationship depicted in Anzaldúa’s story.

PRIMARY THEMES

- Identity and Tradition
- Disconnection/Alienation
- Female Sexuality and Empowerment
- Love as Power
- Contesting cultural and gender stereotypes
- History, myth, and narratives

KEY TERMS***Chicano/a***

An American-born person of Mexican descent.

Cultural Cringe

An internalized sense of one’s own cultural inferiority.

Machismo

A Latin-American concept of patriarchy and masculine pride.

Malinchismo

A type of cultural cringe with culturally-specific implications.

Mestizo/a

A Latin American of mixed Indigenous and European descent.

Mexicana

The Spanish-language feminine form of the term “Mexican.”

Multiculturalism

Recognition of distinct cultural/ethnic identities within a society.

Pluriculturalism

Co-existence of multiple cultural/ethnic identities (person or place) within a society.

INTRODUCTION

Questions to Consider While Reading

A strong feature of Cisneros’s story is its many references to historical and mythical female archetypes such as La Malinche (Malinalli), La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe. This guide will help you understand the social and cultural significance of these figures, point you in the direction of further research on the historical roots of these figures, and facilitate discussions around the power these figures hold in creating myths about gender roles that persist to this day. This guide will further illustrate how these stories are always open to interpretation and accrue many, sometimes contradictory, meanings in different contexts.

As a starting point, this guide offers a brief cultural and social context for Cisneros’s story. Keep in mind that this is not intended as an authoritative introduction to Mexican culture or society. Mexico is a diverse country with 16,933,283 Indigenous persons accounting for 15.1% of its total population (IWGIA).

In 1992, partly in response to pressure from Indigenous groups, a constitutional amendment declared the nation “pluricultural” (IWGIA; Fox). The distinction between **pluriculturalism** and **multiculturalism** is important here: multiculturalism generally refers to the recognition of *distinct* cultural, ethnic, and racial identities within a society; pluriculturalism is less concerned with the distinction of these identities, instead focusing on the co-existence of multiple identities (in reference to either a person or place). This matters because it points to the fact that there is no monolithic Mexican culture, in much the same way as there is no monolithic Canadian culture.



“La Virgen de Guadalupe”

As readers, we are invited to share in a number of cultural and social experiences that are only accessible to us through literature. It is natural that you will have questions, and you are encouraged to ask them, as well as to broaden your understanding with either in-class or independent research. If this guide serves as your introduction to unfamiliar concepts and figures such as La Malinche and La Llorona, you may feel that you do not know the right questions to ask. This is a good place to start: instead of focusing on the specifics of the text, take a wider view. What are the major points of critique and inquiry underlying Cisneros’s story? How about gender roles, for example? Cisneros closely examines female socialization within her cultural context.

By reflecting on these issues within your own cultural context, you can develop a basis for understanding Cisneros’s point of view. Cisneros is reflecting on very similar questions with respect to her own culture and society, and with a focus on the female archetypes which are most prominent within that context.



To push your understanding of Cisneros’s story even deeper, this guide will ask you to familiarize yourself with Laura Paz’s article, “‘Nobody’s Mother and Nobody’s Wife’: Reconstructing Archetypes and Sexuality in Sandra Cisneros’ ‘Never Marry a Mexican.’” Paz argues that “Cisneros pits her characters against mythical figures not only to allow us to question the characters themselves in relation to the myths, but also to reshuffle the conception of the myth itself” (25). *Before* reading Paz’s article, what impression did you have of the way that Cisneros treated her characters in relation to mythical figures? Was your impression of Clemencia positively or negatively affected by these comparisons? Conversely, how did your impression of Clemencia affect your understanding of the mythical figures? Think about how your answers to these questions might have changed with the context and explanations provided by Paz.

As you proceed through this guide, you are encouraged to ask questions and think critically about Paz’s article. Does her article answer any questions you may have had when you first read Cisneros’s story? Is there anything that confused you or left you skeptical? Even if your overall impression of the article is positive, challenge yourself to think of Paz’s work as part of a dialogue. How can the conversation be pushed further? In working through this guide, you may find it helpful to break at certain points and check in with a partner or discussion group to consider these questions and any others that may come to mind.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine that a prospective tourist asked you to summarize Canadian culture off the top of your head. What would you say? If they asked you to differentiate between two provincial cultures (for example, Québec and British Columbia), how would your summary of each province then compare to your summary of the nation? What if they asked you to summarize the culture of your town?
2. Are you familiar with the stories behind Biblical names such as Eve and Jezebel? What about legendary historical figures such as Elizabeth Báthory or Amelia Earhart? These women are akin to the female archetypes of La Malinche and La Llorona in a Western cultural context. How do you think they have shaped or influenced either your own self-image or your understanding of women in general? How are they invoked by the greater society? How have feminist movements troubled our assumptions about classically “bad” female role models like Eve?
3. Summarize the main points in Paz’s article. Are there aspects of Cisneros’s story that Paz does not discuss that you would like to talk about more?

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Female Archetypes and Traditional Gender Roles

In "Nobody's Mother and Nobody's Wife": Reconstructing Archetypes and Sexuality in Sandra Cisneros' 'Never Marry a Mexican,'" Paz illuminates three major female archetypes which are both prominent in Mexican culture and influential of Cisneros' short story: La Malinche, also known as



"Saint Lucy (Santa Lucia)," Francesco del Cossa

Malinalli ("the traitorous woman"), La Llorona ("the bad mother"), and La Virgen de Guadalupe ("the good mother") (12). Paz notes that Cisneros' use of these mythical and historical archetypes may be alienating to those who "[do] not understand the cultural and social implications of the figures" (12). Meanwhile, Mexicana readers, who have been socialized by these archetypes, would easily recognize Cisneros' references; however, as Paz suggests, Mexicanas may yet feel distanced from Cisneros' narrator, Clemencia, who "goes against the grain of what the Mexican culture says a woman should be" (12).

According to Paz, in Mexican and Chicano societies, women are traditionally "expected to be confined to their household duties of cleaning, cooking, and raising children. On the other hand, men are supposed to be the financial providers and therefore rule the family and home" (12-13). Moreover, while a married man remains entitled to his sexual freedom after marriage, women are pressured to be "sexually inactive" in all stages of life. In

other words, a married man is free to flirt and carry on affairs while women, whether married or not, are expected to reserve their bodies for their husbands, and even in the context of marriage, to prioritize his pleasure and desires above their own. Any "woman who breaks out of these constraints is someone who is considered a whore—a woman whom men will use for sex but will never marry" (12-13). Female archetypes have, accordingly, been utilized as "socializing agents designed to instruct, coerce, and frighten rebellious and unruly young women into 'proper' behavior" (qtd. in Cisneros 13).

It is evident from this that so-called "deviant" Mexicanas have long been subject to their society's critical eye; considering that, it seems especially striking for Cisneros to present a female narrator who is her own "harsh critic" (Paz 20). Paz makes an interesting case for the power and significance of this characterization:

The narrator [Clemencia] does not become either prototype ["good" or "bad"] but rather transforms the way the reader views these [historical and] mythical women. Cisneros forces us to look at these mythical figures in a different light, and hence, forces us to not judge the narrator for what she appears to be. She is the first one to acknowledge her own negative qualities without being apologetic for them, which disallows anyone else from criticizing her. Furthermore, the reader is not compelled to hate her despite her immoral actions, because as we see, she is a victim of the hierarchy of cultures and gender society creates, resulting in her lack of self-worth. (19-20)

MYTHIC AND HISTORICAL ALLUSIONS

1. *La Virgen de Guadalupe and Santa Lucía*

While *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is prominent as a "good" female archetype in Mexico, Cisneros makes only slight mention of her (as seen below). She favours *Santa Lucía* in the role of the virgin, a figure whom Paz notes is likely to have personal significance to Cisneros (14n4). According to Paz, "there is no indication that *Santa Lucía* was or is an important figure in Mexico since there is no accessible literature in reference to her" (14n4).

Nights I light all the candles in the house, the ones to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the ones to *El Niño Fidencio*, *Don Pedrito Jaramillo*, *Santo Niño de Atocha*, *Nuestra Señora de San Juan de los Lagos*, and especially, *Santa Lucía*, with her beautiful eyes on a plate.

Your eyes are beautiful, you said. You said they were the darkest eyes you'd ever seen and kissed each one as if they were capable of miracles. And after you left, I wanted to scoop them out with a spoon, place them on a plate under these blue blue skies, food for the blackbirds. (Cisneros 294)

a. *The Myth*

Although the details of *Santa Lucía's* myth can vary, especially with respect to how she became blind, the tale is generally told as follows:

[*Santa Lucía*] is said to have been a wealthy maiden who wanted to devote her life to God. She denied the affections of her suitor and refused to give him her virginity. Instead, she sent him her eyes on a plate as a sign of affection; which is the most she would give of her body. In anger, her infatuate [sic] reported her to the Romans who executed anyone practicing Christianity. She was imprisoned and when the guards tried to bring her to be executed, they could not move her so they killed her by slitting her throat. Thus, she is revered as a martyr and her voluntary blindness has made her the patron saint for the blind. (Paz 14).

b. *Significance*

Santa Lucía is alluded to as a positive contrast to the negative female archetype of *La Malinche* (and more subtly, *La Llorona*), both of which the narrator *Clemencia* compares herself to; however, neither archetype is meant to be understood in black-and-white terms. Cisneros makes clear that any comparison between *Clemencia* and the saint is not intended to redeem the narrator into

sainthood herself (Paz 19). If anything, the two figures are brought together in a way that intentionally complicates both of them, at once “[protecting] the narrator from criticism by paralleling her to a saint” (24) and reminding the reader to “be careful in revering Santa Lucia for her seemingly pointless act of affection” (25). The apparent contradiction in that is the author’s intention—a way of challenging her audience “to not only... question the characters themselves in relation to the myths, but to also reshuffle the conception of the myth itself” (25).

2. *La Llorona*

Cisneros does not explicitly name *La Llorona*, obscuring the allusion to her legend to such a degree that even readers who are familiar with it might allow it to slip by. Nonetheless, the reference to this mythical archetype is worth examination. At the end of the story, Clemencia reflects on what she did after the last time she met with her lover, Drew:

I just did what I did, uncapped the doll inside a doll inside a doll, until I got to the very center, the tiniest baby inside all the others, and this I replaced with a gummy bear. And then I put the dolls back, just like I’d found them, one inside the other, inside the other. Except for the baby, which I put inside my pocket. All through dinner I kept reaching in the pocket of my jean jacket. When I touched it, it made me feel good.

On the way home, on the bridge over the arroyo on Guadalupe Street, I stopped the car, switched on the emergency blinkers, got out, and dropped the wooden toy into that muddy creek where winos piss and rats swim. The Barbie doll’s toy stewing there in that muck. It gave me a feeling like nothing before and since.

Then I drove home and slept like the dead. (Cisneros 298)



a. *The Myth*

La Llorona, “whose name literally means ‘the weeping woman,’ represents the terrible mother archetype” (Paz 14). There are several versions of her myth, but typically, the tale holds that *La Llorona* is a lower-class woman who falls in love with a man of higher social standing. When she becomes pregnant with his children, her lover refuses to acknowledge them, and *La Llorona*—maddened by rage and sorrow—then “drowns her children and herself in a lake or river” (14). As punishment, God condemns her to walk the earth in search of her children’s bodies, wailing from the burden of her regrets.

b. *Significance*

Although the narrator Clemencia makes it clear that she has a deeply troubled relationship with her mother, she alludes to this archetype strictly in reference to herself (as seen in the quote above). Even so, it is worth considering how this arc of the story could be read as a cycle which began with what Clemencia witnessed of her parents’ marriage.

Consider, for example, what Paz states: “In both the legend and the story it is the child who is the victim of the lovers’ quarrel” (25). Might Clemencia be seen as the victim of her mother’s resentment toward her father? In fact, is it possible to view Clemencia as symbolic of both La Llorona and the drowned children? Paz suggests that Clemencia going home to “[sleep] like the dead” (qtd. in Paz 25) relates to a figurative death in connection with having let “her paramour’s rejection consume her and destroy her life” (25). It is worth considering that Clemencia experiences this like a curse, a fate which she has seemingly been condemned to experience because she has so long been consumed and destroyed by the outcome of her parents’ marriage.

3. La Malinche

To achieve a deeper understanding of both Clemencia and her relationship with her mother, it is necessary to consider the story of La Malinche, whose life carries certain parallels to what Clemencia has experienced, especially in regard to experiencing a sense of betrayal by her mother after the death of her father. The link between Clemencia and La Malinche is emphasized by the fact that the primary allusion to her story (as quoted below) is “put strategically after the segment about the narrator’s parents” (Paz 21):

Drew, remember when you used to call me your Malinalli? It was a joke, a private game between us, because you looked like a Cortez with that beard of yours.... My Malinalli, Malinche, my courtesan, you said, and yanked my head back by the braid. (Cisneros 293)

Although La Malinche is a real historical figure who lived almost 500 years ago, it is important to note that her story toes the line of mythic. In considering her life and legacy, it cannot be ignored that “most of what is known about La Malinche comes from the accounts of who is now called Cortés’s ‘official biographer,’ Francisco López de Gómara, and Spanish colonial writer, Bernal Díaz del Castillo” (Paz 15). Not only is there an inherent bias in these accounts, but as Paz notes: “Gómara’s account of [La Malinche] is not that extensive and does not give her enough credit for her role in the helping the Spaniards; Cortes barely mentions her in his own writings” (15n6). Due to the scarcity of sources, these accounts are invaluable and should not be dismissed, but nonetheless must be examined critically.

a. What We Know

La Malinche, who was born Malinalli Tenpal, was an Indigenous Mexican woman born in 1505. She was the daughter of a chieftain who died when she was a child. After his death, her mother remarried to another high-ranking man, and she bore a son. “Due to Mayan law at the time, [Malinalli] would have been entitled to her father’s property and title” (Paz 15); however, her mother and stepfather sought to secure that inheritance for their new son. As a result, when



Derivative of “Carved tree in Arteaga, Coahuila, with La Llorona (Weeping Lady),” Gabriel Perez Salazar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Malinalli was only eight years old, she was sold into slavery, and her mother and stepfather then “took the body of a child slave who had recently died and passed it off as the body of Mallinali to the village” (15).

In 1519, when Malinalli was fourteen years old, she was gifted to the Spaniards as part of a group of slave women. Prominent among the Spaniards was the conquistador Hernan Cortés, who observed Malinalli’s “competence in the native languages of Nahuatl and Chontal Maya” (15) and realized her usefulness as an interpreter. Malinalli thus went on to accompany Cortés on his expeditions, and reportedly learned Spanish in “less than a year” (15).

While at Cortés’ side, Malinalli became his mistress, and in 1522, she bore him a son named Don Martin, “who is symbolically the first *mestizo*” (15). Despite this, the pair were never married; instead, Malinalli was given to be married to the Spaniard Juan Jaramillo, with whom she had a daughter named Marina (the same name which Malinalli was baptized with after meeting Cortés). Around that time, it is alleged that Malinalli “revisited her mother and stepfather and forgave them for their deeds, actually showing gratitude because she had, as a result, become Christian and married a Spaniard” (15).

Unfortunately, there is little known of Malinalli’s life beyond 1528, which is considered the end of the Spaniard conquest. While it is speculated that she died sometime between 1529 or 1551, no one is certain of a more precise date or even a cause. Meanwhile, Cortés is reported to have returned to Spain, leaving behind several mistresses and the children he had fathered during the conquest (15-16).



Donna Marina (La Malinche), from "The Mastering of Mexico" by Kate Stephens (1916) New York: The MacMillan Company.

b. Modern Legacy

The legacy of Malinalli is a complicated one. She has long inspired contempt and condemnation as a traitor to her homeland. In 1982, an attempt to install a statue of Malinalli and her son Martin in Coyoacán (Mexico City) was met by heated protests, forcing the installation to be quickly undone. While the issue remains sensitive, scholars remind us that we will never know the truth of Malinalli as a person; the sparse records of her life were written by Spanish colonizers, who were biased and not above fictionalizing her story (Paz 16). The alleged encounter with her mother and stepfather is particularly suspect, as she is said to have “exhibited pure Christian ideals in [that] encounter... indicating that perhaps she was originally used as a model for behavior, primarily as a positive example for other Amerindians to follow” (Paz 16). If that is true—and there is good reason to believe it is—that would only mark the beginning of Malinalli’s transformation from person into archetype.

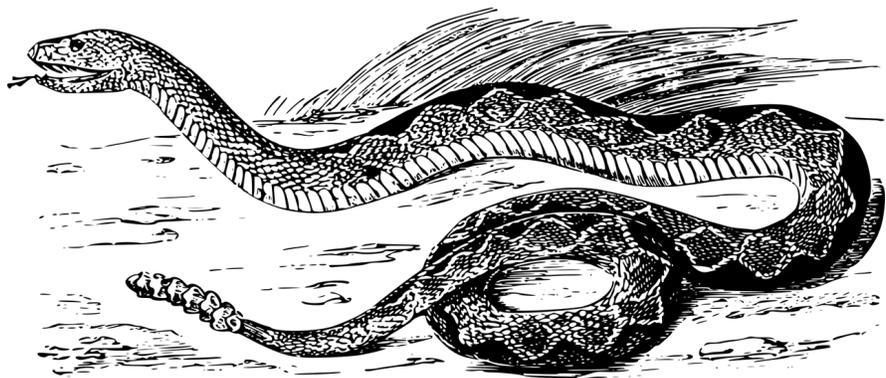
c. Social Impact

In Spanish, the term **malinchismo**, derived from the name La Malinche, primarily refers to someone who is attracted to an outside culture to such a degree that they believe their own culture

to be inferior. While rightfully considered a type of **cultural cringe**—that is, an internalized inferiority complex about one’s own culture compared to others, often rooted in colonialism or cultural alienation—*malinchismo* is so culturally-specific as to necessitate individual mention. To understand why that is, as well as the weight that the term carries in Mexican society, it is critical to trace the evolution of La Malinche as an archetype.

Since the death of La Malinche almost 500 years ago, her image has evolved within the Mexican social imagination from a mere individual into the archetypal “traitorous woman.” Paz traces her evolution from its starting point, noting that La Malinche was first perceived by the Spaniards as a symbol of the “new world” (16). For them, “she was the body that connected the Spanish to the Amerindian, linguistically through interpretation and physically through bearing *mestizo* children” (16). When Mexico began to push for independence from Spain, which they would eventually achieve in 1810, the symbol of La Malinche was reconceived as the “Desirable Whore/Terrible Mother” (Paz 17). Due to the heavy colonial influence of Catholicism, Malinalli was cast into a Biblical metaphor, wherein she became the serpent of Eden, “[tempting] her fellow Amerindians to eat the fruit of the European colonial tree” (17). Paz remarks that “the problem with this metaphor is that it ignores the role of the Spaniards in bringing forth the fruit and of the Amerindians in tasting it, placing all responsibility on La Malinche” (17). In time, and not before Mexico had achieved its independence, La Malinche’s symbol evolved again, and she became both “the snake and the Mexican Eve, the traitor and the temptress,” or in other words, a rationalization for the devastating impact of colonialism.

Unfortunately, it is clear that La Malinche continues to carry considerable blame for the grievances of her people. The real consequence of this is made apparent in the term *malinchismo*, which has a misogynistic edge, essentially seeding a deep suspicion of women as untrustworthy and naturally inclined to evil; and while this is troubling enough, the social consequences women have faced as a result of *malinchismo* are only worsened by the pervasiveness of **machismo** culture—a brand of Latin American patriarchy which both encourages masculine pride and exaggerates masculine qualities. Those men who do not conform to expectations of their gender in this regard are subject to criticism by their society “for failing to fulfill their role as men” (13).



REFLECTIVE WRITING

It is recommended that this exercise begin independently with at least 5 minutes of quiet reflection and writing, after which students may be instructed to either hand in their papers or discuss their thoughts in small groups. Optionally, each student may be asked to make a brief presentation to the class, then open the floor for a brief round of questions and/or comments related to their paper.

1. Paz asserts that “Cisneros pits her characters against mythical figures to not only allow us to question the characters themselves in relation to the myths, but to also reshuffle the conception of the myth itself” (25). Now that you are familiar with the myths which Cisneros draws upon, write a response to Paz’s assertion. In doing so, you may wish to consider the following questions: Do you think Cisneros was successful in deconstructing stereotypical perspectives on the female archetypes she referenced? Would you say your impression of Clemencia was positively or negatively affected by how Cisneros related her narrator to these archetypes? Explain.
2. The use of historical and mythical female archetypes as a socializing agent is a global phenomenon. While you may not be familiar with figures such as La Malinche and La Llorona, it is likely you know the stories behind names such as Eve and Jezebel. Take a moment to think about the most significant female role models (and cautionary tales) you’ve encountered growing up. Carefully consider how you were taught to relate to/think about these female archetypes versus how you conceive of them in the present. Are there any discrepancies? Has your perspective on them changed at all over time? Can you think of any ways in which these female archetypes have influenced either your own self-image or your understanding of women in general?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Drew, the married art teacher with whom Clemencia has an affair, is clearly named as a pun, although the name could also be analyzed more seriously in the sense of “drawing in.” With that in mind, what do you think is the significance behind Clemencia’s name, which means “mild, merciful”? Explain.
2. Based on the given account of Malinalli’s life, is there anything you think she could or should have done differently? Why or not?
3. Scholars suspect that Malinalli’s story may have been manipulated from the very beginning to suit a biased colonial narrative. With that in mind, consider the account of Malinalli’s reunion with her mother and stepfather, who she allegedly forgave for their past misdeeds. Make a case for or against the feasibility of that account, drawing on any evidence you can gather from what you know of her story.
4. What was your initial impression of Cisneros’s story? How was your understanding of the story affected by Paz’s article? Is there anything that you felt Paz should have elaborated on or any aspect of her work that you disagreed with? Explain.

COMPLIMENTARY STORIES

Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Ghost Trap." *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island*, edited by Sophie McCall, Deanna Reder, David Gaertner, and Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill. Wilfrid Laurier University Press. 2017.

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