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THE POWER OF STORYTELLING:
FOLKLORIC ARCHETYPES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON CHARACTER SHAPING IN
FELICIA LUNA LEMUS' *TRACE ELEMENTS OF RANDOM TEA PARTIES*

Abstract

The stories we are told while growing up influence our personality and contribute to the shaping of our identity. Fairy tales, witches, curses and beautiful princesses accompany us throughout our lives, regardless of where we grew up and how we were raised. Folklore also finds its way into contemporary literature. For example, in Felicia Luna Lemus' novel *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, not only Chicana myths, but also Western and especially German folklore play an essential role. The element of storytelling itself is central in the novel, being closely linked to the author's use of the symbolism of color, hair and home, alongside the focus on the protagonist's cultural roots and search for her own identity. The character of Leticia draws on her Chicana background and on the stories her grandmother used to tell her in order to find her path in the United States of America and learn to be herself. In this paper, I am going to argue that the fairy tale and mythical elements create a safe haven and home for Leticia, the novel's protagonist, and, furthermore, enable her to learn to express freely her unique Chicana and queer identity.

Keywords: Chicana literature, folkloric archetypes, identity, La Llorona, Grimm

Introduction

The power of storytelling is undeniable. The stories we are told while growing up stay with us forever and shape our character. What is the moral of the story? What is the moral of *my* story? We find comfort in fairy tales, stories and myths, because of their certain degree of predictability. The beginning and the ending are set and comfort can be found in finitude. As for fairy tales, they also provide us with a certainty that good wins over evil, that hard work is rewarded and that the prince comes to save the day. How can you look up to figures in stories and fairytales though, when they do not look, act or feel like you do? A queer Chicana can hardly find any role models in traditional folklore of any kind. A case in point is Leticia, the young queer Chicana protagonist of Felicia Luna Lemus' novel *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*. Leticia has learnt all she knows about being a woman either from stories or her grandmother, but she has to realize rather early in her life that her perception of her own gender identity is nothing like the one portrayed in stories or the one her grandmother performs. Still, stories are part of our cultures, societies and also our inner self. Lemus refers to this truth and creates a character whose life is shaped by a rather real embodiment of a mythical figure, La Llorona, the murderous mother from Mexican folklore. Leticia's childhood stories are a part of her and she tries to invent a new form of identity for herself by drawing on her cultural background and trusting on what feels right for herself regardless of what society has established as *right* and *female*.

Although or especially because of the fact that this novel has not yet received that much attention, I want to highlight the significance of the representation of a character that unites queer and Chicana elements in modern-day literature. By drawing on queer theory, Chicana culture and gender

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identity, I am going to analyze the novel's protagonist's journey towards becoming the young woman she wants to be. In this paper, I am going to filter out archetypes, typically found in folklore, from Felicia Luna Lemus' novel *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*. I will argue that the fairy tale and mythical elements enable her to express a unique identity. In my analysis, I am going to focus on archetypes that are typical for Grimms' fairy tales and link them to the way Leticia's grandmother tells stories to her granddaughter. I am also going to discuss the meaning and symbolism of *color, hair* and *home* throughout the novel, as they are prominently featured in both *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* and Grimms' fairytales. I will attempt to draw a connection between the descriptions of the houses, colors and hairstyles and Leticia's gender identity. Leticia tries to get to a place not only beyond race, but also beyond gender. In the course of her self-discovery it however becomes evident that in her world almost everything has gendered connotations. Ultimately, it is not as easy as assumed to break free from gender stereotypes, neither in Lemus' fictional nor in our actual world and societies, regardless of where one grows up. The story mirrors the difficulties numerous people have to face while growing up and trying to find a way to express themselves. Lemus' novel addresses struggles such as the inner conflicts revolving around self-expression, gender identity, generational divergencies, cultural heritage and sexuality and thereby represents countless human beings and gives them a voice.

Furthermore, I am going to pay attention to the character of Weeping Woman, the role she plays in Leticia's life, plus her connection to Nana. Both Leticia's grandmother and Weeping Woman illustrate her ties to her Mexican cultural heritage that Leticia is so set on maintaining and combining with her subjective view on life.

Chicanx Culture and Folkloric Archetypes

Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties by Felicia Luna Lemus is to be placed in a Chicanx context. The term *Chicanx* refers to "a conglomeration of native-born Americans; recently arrived Mexican immigrants; long-term permanent residents; first-, second-, and third-generation families; and descendents of seventeenth-century Spanish settlers" (Castro, 2001: xiii). Basically, a Chicanx person is somebody that has ancestral roots in Mexico, but was born in the United States of America. However, not all Mexican Americans prefer to be referred to as *Chicanx*, but perceive themselves as being *Latino/a* as this term includes other groups whose cultural roots can be found in Cuba or Puerto Rico (Castro, 2001: xiii, 46).

Figures from Chicanx folklore such as La Llorona and La Malinche can be found in Lemus' *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* and play significant roles in the protagonist's process of finding herself and establishing her own identity. As Perez states in *There Was a Woman*, La Llorona represents an essential part of Mexican storytelling tradition, both in Mexico and the United States of America and is oftentimes also referred to as the *Weeping* or *Wailing Woman*. Essentially, she is a ghost that is said to haunt the river banks. Her motif derives from her suffering from feeling forced to kill her children. Over the course of time, the prominence of La Llorona has increased and she is oftentimes used as a cultural allegory, a spooky bedtime story, a legend, spirit, symbol or even a living creature (Perez, 2008: ix, x).

The Chicanx author Gloria Anzaldúa also writes about the significance of the three most prominent female figures of Mexican folklore: La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche and La Llorona. La Virgen de Guadalupe represents the virgin mother that is always by her people's sides. Contrary to that stands La Malinche who is the representation of a raped mother that has been abandoned by everyone. She also finds her way into Lemus' novel. Anzaldúa perceives La Llorona as a combination of the other two and as a woman that is constantly looking for the children she has lost due to her own actions (Anzaldúa, 2012: 52-53). The importance and meaning of these female figures stay subjective and personal, though, and that can also be seen in *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*. La Llorona is the one that shelters Leticia and also keeps her in touch with her Mexican roots. She is not portrayed as a figure that could scare children into behaving well or as one capable of coming for another woman's children.

Another aspect of the novel that cannot be overlooked when analyzing the protagonist's character development is the fact that Leticia identifies not only as Chicanx, but also as dyke. Therefore, the novel can also be placed in the context of Queer Theory. According to Jagose, *queer* can be used as an "umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identification"

(Jagose, 1996: 1). This definition applies to Leticia and her sexual orientation and perception of herself and, at times, stands in contrast to her Chicana heritage.

However, I argue that the influencing forces in the novel are not solely taken from Chicana Culture. Leticia's search for herself and for a way of representing her true self in society is marked by tales and myths. Not all of them are rooted in the Americas. Some references she makes lead to German folklore, especially to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's fairy tales. Particularly to the symbolism and morals found in some of these stories. Some of these fairy tales can furthermore be linked to folklore in other parts of the world, for example Mexico.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* a *fairy tale* (Stevenson and Waite, 2011: 512) is characterized by magical, idealized and extremely happy elements. It is to be distinguished from a myth in terms of a myth being "a traditional story concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events" (Stevenson and Waite, 947). *Mythology* (948) is another term that has to be considered in this analysis. It is defined as "a collection of myths, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition" (Stevenson and Waite, 948). These terms are significant for this study and the connections I am going to make between folkloric tales and *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*.

Folklore is one of the key terms of this analysis that is not easily defined. There are various definitions of the term that illustrate the duality of the concept that derives from the different perspectives from which one can look at and approach the topic of folklore. In general, folklore "joins jokes and myths, gestures, legends, costumes and music into a single category of knowledge" (Ben-Amos, 1975: 3). This observation seems clear and I would suggest adding that folklore does not solely stand for knowledge, but also for tradition and in a further sense also contributes to creating a culture that unites a group of people sharing the same cultural roots.

Abrahams also combines the term *folklore* with tradition and emphasizes how essential it is to consider that the foundation of folklore is found in the oral tradition of storytelling (Abrahams, 1975: 16). Lemus plays with the idea of folklore being connected to oral storytelling and bases the connection and relationship that Leticia and her grandmother have on the myths that derive from their shared Chicana roots. Leticia learns about her cultural background through stories and that is also how she narrates certain episodes of her life as a young woman between the traditions of her Chicana community – embodied first and foremost by her grandmother – and the ideals and worldviews of her queer community. She tries to make sense of this world and reality of in-betweenness by looking at it the way she knows best and that is to perceive her life as a sequence of stories.

The Symbolism of *Home*, *Hair* and *Color* in Reference to German Folklore

When analyzing Grimms' fairy tales, a feminist lens cannot be overlooked, especially when considering these German tales within the Chicana and Queer context. This background in combination with the novel addressing gender hierarchy, suggests a feminist approach. When reading Grimms' fairy tales one has to wonder why every woman waits to be saved by a man (preferably a handsome prince), while being fair, beautiful, virtuous and good seems to be a nonnegotiable requirement for every heroine.

To no surprise then comes Jeana Jorgensen's observation of the language use in Grimms' fairy tales, especially the adjectives used to describe male and female characters and the differences in the focus on physical attributes. Evidently, "hair" (Jorgensen, 2014: 130) and "tears" (Jorgensen, 135) and "blood" (Jorgensen, 130) are some of the nouns mostly associated with female characters in Grimms' fairy tales. Although German folklore is hardly referenced in the novel, I argue that there is a connection to be made between the novel and Grimms' fairy tales. Leticia's hair plays an important role in the novel as her hairstyle functions as an expression and performance of her gender identity. Ultimately, her hair is also a reason for her discord with her grandmother as she does not approve of boyish looks.

Grimms' fairy tales give us the impression that women have to have long hair in order to be female. Andrea Linda Deslauriers made the observation that hair symbolism in Grimms' fairy tales is multi-layered and differs from story to story. However, in various tales such as "The Nixie in the Pond", the hair symbolism seems to overlap with the general idea of hair and beauty in *Trace*

Elements of Random Tea Parties. Deslauriers states that long hair symbolizes “femininity, sensuality, eroticism, beauty, attraction, control and seductiveness” (46). Leticia cuts her hair and distances herself from the established idea of what a woman should look like. She dresses the way she feels and her personal style does not always overlap with what society dictates as being *female*. She tries to fit these norms to please her grandmother, but has to admit to herself that being true to her is more important than to fit in with her family’s believe system. Leticia later imagines what her Nana would have said to her had they made up before she died and thinks she would have wondered “Why don’t you grow your hair out like when you were younger?” (Lemus, 2003: 236) and “Just natural and long like other girls’...” (Lemus, 236). She does not do so and rejects stereotypical gender performance further by returning a bra with the conclusion that “it had been physically unbearable to wear the pretty little thing” (Lemus, 236). This realization can be read as her returning every attribute that makes her in a culturally accepted way *female* and her stepping into a future in which she can for herself identify what it is that makes her female. After all, just because you are born a woman does not mean that you have to perform femininity.

Grimms’ fairy tales are even specifically referenced in the novel at one point. For example, in the passage Leticia is picking out a cake for her and K’s house-warming party. In this scene, Leticia expresses her rejection of the concept of a heterosexual partnership as a culturally accepted norm, when she makes the observation that “The design was almost perfect. Instead of the Hansel and Gretel duo, I wanted two miniature Gretel figurines with their pink ponytails.” (Lemus, 175). By announcing this wish to the elderly lady at the cake shop, she triggers a discussion that illustrates the women’s different perceptions and ideals, as the woman in the cake shop refuses to put two Gretel figurines on the cake. Leticia tries to conceal the real reason for her wish to have two female characters on top of the cake and makes up a story and reason that is more acceptable by society, but she has reason to believe that the woman can see through her lie and notes “I didn’t cringe once under her stare that stated loud and clear ‘I know you’re lying, you genderless freak cake vampire.’” (Lemus, 175). I think that Leticia makes this comparison of the cake figurines to Gretel from Grimms’ fairy tales because these children embody childlike purity and naiveté, as well as, a strong-willed personality, which is a description that fits her and K at this point in the novel, too.

Another link is the theme of not being able to find one’s way back home. In *Hansel and Gretel* the children are left alone in the woods and cannot remember the way home. On their search, they make the discovery of a witch’s house. Leticia also cannot find her way home in the sense that she has lost her connection to her grandmother after she had found out about Leticia’s gender queerness. Although in the Grimms’ original version of the fairy tale the witch’s house is solely described as being made out of “bread” (Lemus, 7), “cake” (Lemus, 7) and “sugar” (Lemus, 7), it has since been oftentimes called “gingerbread house”.

The gingerbread house is also a link to Lemus’ *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, as Leticia refers to her and K’s house as “the gingerbread house” (Lemus, 164). I read this naming as the protagonist’s foreshadowing the progression of the story. At first, this house seems to be perfect. Leticia has managed to get away from her apartment building in which life was dictated by a privileged, male “Skinhead” (Lemus, 151) who personifies male dominance. Leticia has also left her Nana’s “pink house” (Lemus, 35) behind. This house can be seen as a representative of femininity in the normative sense, due to the pink color of that house that usually stands for everything associated with femininity. When she moves into “the gingerbread house” (Lemus, 164), she sees this house as a safe haven and looks forward to a happy future with K. But, as the narrator that shares her story a while after everything had taken place, she also knows that her luck was about to change. By calling it the “gingerbread house” (Lemus, 164), she implies that something bad is about to happen. Leticia later describes this downfall as “the ground shook and my gingerbread life shattered into pieces” (Lemus, 192) and thereby turns the gingerbread house, with all its connotations, into a metaphor.

This storyline is not unlike Hansel’s and Gretel’s connection to the witch’s house. When they first saw the candy house they also thought they were in luck and enjoyed all the perks of this building, but, as it turns out, they were not that fortunate after all. Leticia’s story has a happy ending and that is another connection that can be made between the two narratives.

Grimms’ *Hansel and Gretel* is also an interesting example, because it has been rewritten in a Mexican context several times. What is striking about various adaptations of the German fairy tale is the way certain details were changed in order to fit the cultural context. For example, in Nahuatl Indian

re-writings of *Hansel and Gretel* in Mexico the lack of “conjugal and filial loyalty” (Taggart, 1986: 453) is central. Another aspect that is foregrounded in the Mexican tale adaptations mentioned in Taggart’s essay is the gender hierarchy and male dominance with a special focus on its significance within a family. What is added to the original German version is a figure called “Earth Mother” (Taggart, 455), which stands for a woman that is both close to nature and in juxtaposition to the children’s stepmother. The nature aspect seems to be more central in Mexican folklore than in its German equivalent and illustrates one way of adapting a story to one own’s needs.

The Trinity of Weeping Woman, Leticia and her Grandmother

As already mentioned, not only German folklore and Mexican adaptations of German folklore are to be considered when analyzing *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* on the grounds of folkloristic archetypes, but also elements of Mexican and Chicana folklore have to be examined. Chicana and Mexican-American folklore presume “an intimate knowledge of the ethnic group” (Garcia, 1976: 83). They are known to combine tragic and comic themes. According to Ricardo Garcia, La Llorona is one of the four prototypical characters in Mexican-American folklore. She has the function of threatening children in case of them misbehaving, which is similar to what Leticia is told when growing up. Furthermore, Garcia claims that “folklore represents the Mexican American’s unconscious attempts at self-definition” (Garcia, 85) and I am in complete agreement with this statement. The elements of storytelling and the re-telling of tales in the novel are central to the plot and illustrate Leticia’s attempts of self-identification. Her path is shaped by the influence of myths, stories and tales and, as she navigates through a world of magical archetypes, she finds a way to express her individuality, as well as, her gender queerness. One of these mythical characters that accompany her on her way is La Llorona, or, as she calls her, Weeping Woman.

In *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, Leticia and her Nana re-appropriate La Llorona for their purposes and make the mythical figure their own. Tales are not meant to be set in stone. They derive from an oral tradition and are representative for a shared cultural understanding and, consequently, they are supposed to change and evolve. In the sense of culturally expected gender performance, Nana’s Chicana Culture seems to be rather close to Grimms’ description of gender roles. Katherine Sugg in her essay “The Ultimate Rebellion: Chicana Narratives of Sexuality and Community” also addresses the connection between community and tradition as well as its effects on personal identity in relation to Chicana Culture. She wonders why sexuality always seems to be an issue when talking about “personal histories, cultural and ethnic communities, and political identities” (Sugg, 2003: 139). In this essay, Sugg focuses on a feminist approach to Chicana Culture and exemplifies her argument by referencing Chicana Literature. Although she does not mention Felicia Luna Lemus, she talks for example about Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa whose tradition Lemus follows. I agree with Sugg when she claims that “The work of Chicana feminists further interrogates and exemplifies the impossible position that women occupy in relation to discourses of ‘community,’ ‘tradition,’ and ‘modernity’” (Sugg, 152-153). Leticia’s position in her world is also an “impossible” (Sugg, 152) one. On the one hand, she tries to please her Nana and follows the tradition and, on the other hand, she knows that being part of this culture means to neglect her own needs. This is a sad realization as she identifies as Chicana. She believes in Mexican folklore and mythology and lives with the belief in the presence of La Malinche, La Llorona and also La Virgen. However, she is especially fixated on La Malinche and La Llorona.

La Malinche. Yes, that woman, the archetype of **the Wrong Kind of Woman**. Not surrounded by cherubs and pink roses like the Virgen de Guadalupe, our blessed patron mother saint. Not pasted on candles in textured tall glasses that we lit for thanks. No, the Weeping Woman and her cousin Malinche, they were **bad, bad, bad girls**, those two were.

Those two girls, their **fierce rebel lasting power** made people remember them long after they had died. They were **everything I wanted to be**. (Lemus, 19; emphases mine)

Leticia solidarizes with La Malinche and La Llorona and partly identifies herself through them. She learns that there were - and are - Chicana women that do not embody the “perfect woman” and that is where she seems to fit in as well.

La Llorona is one of the archetypes in the novel that function as a tie to folklore. She is a mythical figure that is rooted in Mexican folklore and oftentimes appears in Chicana Literature. Sandra Cisneros’s short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek* features numerous short stories in which La Llorona as well as La Malinche play an essential role. Ana Castillo is another Chicana writer that uses the La Llorona figure in her literature, for example in her novel *So Far From God*. *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* by Lucha Corpi is also an example for a Chicana novel that features La Llorona. However, the mythical figure is also represented in various other art forms and is even the title figure of the American horror movie *The Curse of La Llorona* from 2019. She is without doubt a figure that appears in numerous works of Chicana artists and is a character that plays an important role in various people’s lives, too.

La Llorona, also referred to as The Weeping Woman, is said to have been an Indian woman who drowned her children after being rejected by her lover and, ever since, she is known to moan the death of her children and haunt men to kill them (Kearney, 1969: 199). In *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, this mythical figure appears as Weeping Woman that is never far from Leticia’s side. Weeping Woman is a friend and guiding figure solely to Leticia and can in this version only be seen and heard by her. Leticia who has lost her parents early on in her life and has always struggled with the lack of a feeling of belonging, finds support, recognition and trust in Weeping Woman. I argue that Weeping Woman functions as a variation of a surrogate mother, role model and reliable friend to Leticia. She is the only character in her life that she trusts. They are tightly connected and that is visible in the way Leticia deals with her and describes her encounters with Weeping Woman.

Leticia’s tight connection to Weeping Woman is not only visible in her actions, but also in the affectionate expressions she uses when talking to and about her. Very early in the novel, Leticia states that “this is really about my girl Weeping Woman, Nana, and me” (Lemus, 3) and thereby she does not only introduce the main characters of the novel, but also the people that are dearest to the protagonist. Her language is rich in symbolic and metaphoric meaning and imagery, for example when she describes being calmed down by Weeping Woman numerous times in the middle of the night.

Weeping Woman, **she kissed me** slow and steady and all of a sudden. My lips stung pleasant, her kiss was unexpected like a memory I hadn’t lived yet. Everything in her presence was different from **countless times she had visited before**, but **I knew what to expect**. Her copper grin was mine to taste sweet chocolate with each breath in. She firefly-sparked me and set my skin tingling. **My girl** Weeping’s metal whisper echoed in the layered shadows of the room (Lemus, 119; emphases mine).

This passage nicely illustrates Leticia’s and Weeping Woman’s relationship and the love and trust the protagonist puts in her mythical friend. Leticia’s Nana embodies the tie to the protagonist’s cultural roots and that connection is made even stronger through the presence of Weeping Woman. Hernandez observes that while growing up, Leticia seeks to have a steady love relationship and maintain a good relationship with her grandmother, the only family member that she has left (Hernandez, 2007: 132). Although she is right to assume that Leticia’s goals are to gain some stability in her life and uphold the relationship to her grandmother, it has to be added that her greatest goal is to find a way to live the life she wants to live and that also does not disregard the traditions of her Chicana culture. What Hernandez also fails to mention in that context is the significance of Weeping Woman. She is yet another embodiment of Leticia’s Mexican background. Besides from working on pleasing her grandmother, Leticia is also very closely connected to Weeping Woman.

Leticia’s connection to Weeping Woman exceeds one of a typical friendship and the fact that Weeping Woman is read as a variation of La Llorona further underlines their unusual relationship. Weeping Woman is not a human character and is, at least by Leticia, believed to possess somewhat magical powers. This supernatural element in the novel recalls that of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s fairy tale *Cinderella* and the main character’s connection to her dead mother. Cinderella was told to “be good” (Grimm and Grimm, 1884: 1) and she honors her mother’s wish long after her death. Her loyalty and moral purpose are rewarded with gifts that spring from her mother’s grave and enable her

to dress appropriately and go meet the prince. This rather dark connection between the innocent girl and her dead mother was made much jollier in Disney's movie adaption of the classic: the mother's grave was substituted by a chubby and sympathetic Fairy Godmother. Regardless of whether a tree symbolizing Cinderella's dead mother's spirit or a smiling, gray-haired, singing Fairy Godmother is looking out for the good and righteous girl, she is protected by their magic, because she is simply "good" (Grimm and Grimm, 1884: 1).

Leticia considers herself also in some way protected by Weeping Woman. I argue that this feeling of security is based on her being connected - and at least being partly true - to her Chicana roots and her Nana's idealism. She is very careful in what she wears and how she performs her (gender) identity in front of her grandmother who represents the link to Leticia's Chicana heritage. Leticia wants to fit her Nana's image of a young Chicana woman in California and she seeks to please her. As long as she does, Weeping Woman is by her side, calms her down and gives her the feeling of never being alone.

This link is not made clear until Leticia lowers her guard on Mother's Day and her Nana sees her in her "carefully honed boyiness" (Lemus, 169). From that moment on, the bond between Nana and Leticia is broken. By extension the connection between Leticia and Weeping Woman is damaged as well. Leticia does what Cinderella did not do: she goes against what her grandmother expects of her and has to suffer the consequences. Her Nana does not talk to her anymore and Weeping Woman lets her down when Nana suffers a stroke. The pain of the separation and the possibility of losing her grandmother forever make Leticia "almost willing to promise Nana's god that I'll grow out my barber-shop boy haircut if he promises to make her better again" (Lemus, 195). She explicitly calls this higher power "Nana's god" (Lemus, 195), again emphasizing that she does not entirely share her grandmother's beliefs and faith. Moreover, she even states that rather than losing her Nana "I want a headache from a too tightly woven braid" (Lemus, 195). This can be read in a literal way: she wants to grow her hair back and wear it the way her grandmother would want her to. It can also be read metaphorically, meaning that Leticia is willing to restrict herself altogether again. Effectively, she would return to a reality in which she is not able to perform her true identity, but has to adapt and hide in order to fit in with the culturally accepted image of a Chicana woman.

Leticia's being a lesbian does not seem to pose a problem to her grandmother, but being gender queer is something that the Chicana woman can neither understand, nor accept. What Gloria Anzaldúa has already sadly detected in *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is also true for Leticia; namely that "For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior" (Anzaldúa, 1987: 41). Although Leticia's goal is not to rebel, but simply be herself, I argue that Anzaldúa's observation could not be more fitting for Lemus' protagonist in *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*.

When Nana suffers a stroke and, against Leticia's expectations, Weeping Woman does not come running to Nana's aid and prevents her from dying, Leticia's relationship to Weeping Woman changes drastically. At this point, Leticia understands the price she has to pay for following her heart. Her world is turned upside down and she does not understand "where the hell Weeping and her miracle sisters had been when Nana needed their powerful protection most" (Lemus, 206). The protagonist loses her trust in her companion and, therefore, does not only suffer the loss of her grandmother, but also the one of her guiding figure. Hence, she has to think about her identity as independent and individual from any other being. She has to find out who she is without the strong ties to her Chicana heritage that have been personified and kept alive by the presence of Nana and Weeping Woman. Leticia does so by looking in the past and remembering. She in particular recounts a tale told by her grandmother to her. Possibly for the first time, she understands what her grandmother actually wanted to pass on to her, which is an understanding of the rich culture she comes from and is always going to be a part of.

This shift in Leticia (who is starting to define herself for her own and apart from Nana, Weeping Woman and the community she is and wants to be a part of) is marked by the revisiting of the earlier introduced theme of storytelling. Leticia is trying to find herself as well as a way to perform her true identity wherever she goes. Throughout the entire novel, Leticia has tried to fit in and adapt to her environment. When visiting her grandmother, she dresses and styles herself as she was expected. When being in the midst of her dyke community, she changes her appearance and behavior to match the person she is currently involved with. For Nolan she is a "princess" (Lemus, 59), for Edith she

embodies her nickname “Bird” and, when being with Rob, she acts out masculinity. For a long time, Leticia lets others define who she is. For example, she observes that “I wasn’t a boy, not entirely at least, but at times I wasn’t a girl either. Rob would have accused me of being a traitor for claiming part boy” (Lemus, 169). At first, she seems to be fine with her situation and accepts it as part of dyke and Queer Culture, but later on, she distances herself from this community and tries to interpret her persona for herself.

Darnell L. Moore argues that, although Queer Culture seems to be based on a concept of structurelessness, there are limitation and structures within the community on the basis of “race, class, ability, and other forms of social categorization” (Moore, 2013: 257). I agree with his claim and I think Lemus’ novel does so, too. It becomes evident in numerous passages, for example when the group of dyke girls meets lesbians with prejudice and disrespect. The group seems to identify themselves through what they are not. This clear image of what a queer person should be like is what, in the end, alienates Leticia from this community. Towards the end of *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, she encounters the members of her former community again and realizes that she perceives them in a rather different way.

Wall-to-wall with the same women I had seen for years. The ones I had shared beers with and knew nothing about. The ones I had flirted with and slept with and teased and knew nothing about. The ones I had become friends with and knew very little about. Even with each other, we shielded ourselves amidst the boys who owned the world (Lemus, 241).

Leticia understands how little she actually knows about her former community. She recognizes them for what they have truly been to her and vice versa. There is strength in numbers and strength they needed to establish their truth in a world that is shaped like “Boy Town” (Lemus, 241). Leticia takes a step back, revisits her grandmother’s stories and she tries to bring structure in her reality that used to resemble Moore’s image of Queer Culture in which “Queerness, in praxis, is antistructure” (Moore, 258). Leticia needs a structured life, at least in part. This is one of the reasons why she finds comfort in stories, both made-up or mythical and real ones from her past. Stories have a clear and set beginning and ending. Especially folklore oftentimes follows a specific pattern. At this stage of her life, Leticia seems to find comfort in certainty and trusts that her life will take a similar turn.

Therefore, it comes to no surprise that the storytelling motif is revisited at the end of the novel, with Leticia’s recollection of a story that was told to her by her grandmother. She recalls that Nana “tells me cuentitos that she’s kept secret or maybe invents on the spot as we drink tall blue tin tumblers of iced amber hue” (Lemus, 246). Whether the stories derive from her grandmother’s imagination or are true does not seem to matter to Leticia. She treasures this memory of being told a story by her Nana. The story itself has folklore character as well. Not only does it revolve around pigeons and animals that play a special role in most tales, but it also teaches a lesson in moral. It is exactly the lesson that Leticia cherishes the most and would have liked her grandmother to live herself. The story teaches that “It might not have been what some thought was proper for those pigeons to have the diamonds, but that was the way it was supposed to be. And no one should have messed with that” (Lemus, 247). Leticia retells exactly this story, because considering the lesson it teaches, she finds that in her fairy tale ending her Nana would have accepted her for who she truly is. She is who she is and nobody should want her to be different, least of all her own grandmother. That is what Leticia takes away from this tale. The fact that it was her Nana who has told and maybe even invented the story in the first place is reason enough for Leticia to think that, deep down, her grandmother loved her for who she is and forgave her in the end.

Through remembering and searching for answers in the past, Leticia finds her way to her grandmother again. This path leads her away from Weeping Woman. Their trinity only ends to some extent though, as it was Nana who has introduced Leticia to Weeping Woman in the first place. Therefore, I argue that Weeping Woman can be read as being partly Nana. She was the one watching over Leticia when her grandmother was not near, made sure that she stayed connected to her Chicana roots and enforced Nana’s world view on Leticia. Nana has created Weeping Woman for her granddaughter to be a life-long companion and true friend that simultaneously ensures her behavior to be what Nana expects from a young Chicana. Leticia recalls that “Weeping Lady, she came riding into town on the cuentitos Nana handed me to teach life without spoon-feeding it” (Lemus, 18). Thereby,

she expresses her awareness of Weeping Woman being part of a small, Mexican tale, “cuentito” (Lemus, 18), that is part of her heritage as a Chicana individual.

Conclusion

Leticia’s journey in *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* illustrates that finding, shaping and performing one’s identity, and especially gender identity is not an easy task, especially not if what you think and feel you are does not coincide with what is considered to be the socially accepted *norm*. Lemus’ protagonist eventually learns how to be true to herself without disregarding her cultural background. The struggles she has to face mirror numerous young girls’ and boys’ experiences in various parts of the world who are trying to find a way to express themselves that combines their personal identity and the shared history of their families. Felicia Luna Lemus gives them a voice and highlights that there is no right or wrong when it comes to simply being who you are. Furthermore, just like in Grimm’s fairy tales, the good and true characters win and get rewarded for their honesty and for staying true to themselves.

Leticia finds comfort in what she knows. Her character draws on both Mexican and German folklore to achieve the freedom to be whoever she wants to be. The folklore itself and the message the chosen stories convey are important in the shaping of Leticia’s personality. They give her the strength to perform her gender queer identity close to home. Not only the stories told, but also the element of storytelling itself, is central in the novel. Nana tells stories, Weeping Woman is introduced to Leticia through a story and Leticia, as the narrator, tells her own story to the reader. She thereby incorporates the novel in the oral tradition that tales are built on and, as such, she creates a tale on its own.

Although Grimm’s fairy tales are hardly ever explicitly mentioned in Lemus’s novel, I argue that various connections can be made between Leticia’s story and German folklore on the basis of Jacob and William Grimm. Notably, German folklore is not usually associated with Chicana texts, but in this case, I am convinced that a connection can be made and that this connection adds further depth to the reading of the novel and the folkloric analysis as well as to the discussion of gender identity.

Leticia looks, lives and loves differently than her grandmother or other Chicana women do – as far as she knows. She does not have the long, beautiful hair that the women in fairy tales have, identifies as dyke and, instead of dreaming of prince charming, she loves women. Finding a compromise between what is expected of her and what she truly is, is an ongoing struggle: only when she ultimately manages to be true to herself, she feels free and real.

With the combination of archetypes from different folkloric contexts, Lemus highlights the mixed nature of Leticia’s character and identity. By following her heart and choosing to stop trying to fit the ideal description of a young Chicana, Leticia liberates herself from culturally set gender roles. Ultimately, she embraces her true queer self, without disregarding her Chicana background. This revelation can be read as the moral of Leticia’s story. Always stay true to yourself, be patient and you will find your way. Now, if she was to look in the mirror (magical or not), Leticia can honestly say that she is the “truest of them all”.

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